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SKELETONS IN MY CLOSET:

A COLLECTION OF PERSONAL ESSAYS AND SHORT FICTION

Macey Howell

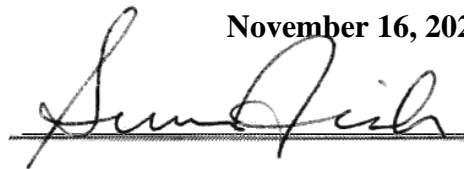
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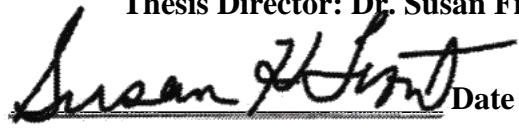
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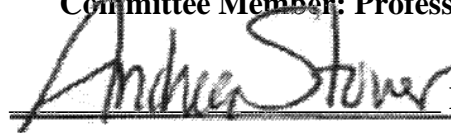
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Cupcake Shoes

As the only girl in my family, I was inundated with dolls. Out of all of the dolls I owned in my childhood—Barbies, Polly Pockets with their gummy, candy-colored rubber clothing that looked delectably asphyxiating, American Girl Dolls—it's unexpected that I also strongly remember a more primitive cousin to these hyper-customizable toys. A cousin to the paper doll, she was more of a toy than a doll, a small painting of a girl with a matching, outlined wooden cutout that pressed on top, trapping scraps of fabric between the layers to make her look like she was wearing clothing. I remember spending hours sitting on the floor and figuring out the best ways to layer the fabric to create different outfits, how to layer the fabric over the legs to make a skirt, the rough-then-smooth feel of the sparkly sequined fabric against my fingertips as I folded it.

In a way, developing my style has been similar to this doll. I've picked up sparkly bits and pieces of fabric that I liked and awkwardly patched these separate and sometimes dissonant fashions together on my body to fit. My closet is a mix of every personality and mood I've ever experienced: casual, approachable, demure, extravagant, basic, ridiculous, sleek, classic, aggressive, moody, dressy. If I want to dress ultra feminine, I have dozens of skirts and dresses to choose from. If I want to dress more masculine, I have menswear-inspired blazers, trousers, loafers, and I have actual menswear shirts and even some boys clothing because it fits me. If each piece is viewed individually, it's just clothing. Together, it's a testament to who I am, the contradictory and messy and niche. If you were to split my style personality into separate people, tear strips away like ripping

a paper doll, you would begin with a girl who can dress herself but is still learning how to dress.

Before I learned to compare myself to women photoshopped until their humanity was stripped away pixel by pixel and distortion by distortion, before I worried about things as trivial as opinions or clothing sizes, before I felt the weight of womanhood and the pressure of femininity, before I shunned the color pink, I had a pair of cupcake shoes. They were clogs, their vinyl tops shiny as gumballs and patterned with photo-realistic cupcakes in shades of pink with multicolored sprinkles. I distinctly remember buying them in a local shoe store, where they were propped on display against the wooden wall at the back of the store where the sunlight made the vibrant colors come alive. I was probably there to buy a pair of sneakers that I would ruin at recess by playing in the dirt and making mud potions, but I somehow convinced my mom to get me these completely ridiculous shoes. I know these shoes were special because they made me like my feet that I was already insecure about at ten years old. Impossibly narrow, high arches, prominent veins—I've always had the feet of an elderly woman and have been quite aware of it. But these shoes made me forget about how much I hated my feet; they made my feet the object of attention, of my own adoration. My mom, being a practical mother, probably tried to convince me to get shoes that were more toned-down, some penny loafers, perhaps, but the moment I saw the cupcake shoes, something inside me whispered, *No, these. You need these.*

I've always had very strong opinions about clothing, and on top of that I'm stubborn. I'm sure this combination was exasperating for my mother who just wanted to make sure I had enough clothing. When I was no older than five, I refused to wear any

pair of socks besides my socks that had scalloped tops and that didn't have a seam line in the toe. I wore them until they were so threadbare I could feel the sole of my shoe sticking to my heel through the sock. Eventually, I got over this particularity, but I remember being so angry about the socks even when my mom calmly explained that she couldn't find any more of the same socks. It's ridiculous now to think about how emotionally attached I was to socks, of all things, but in those moments my anger felt valid, righteous. Even then, I understood that clothing was more than clothing, that they were more than socks: they were what I felt myself in.

When I wear something that I can't stand, it feels like I'm crawling in my own skin. That's what happened with my family's infamous black turtleneck picture. When my brothers and I were about six years old, my parents decided that they wanted a cute, matching portrait of the three of us, their triplets. What resulted in the stuff of nightmares, and I'm not just talking about the portrait. Family pictures are stressful enough, but add in forcing three children to wear tight black turtlenecks *and* not complain *and* collaborate with each other *and* sit still for a long time *and* try to smile convincingly. I distinctly remember standing in the bathroom of the photography studio that smelled like every wall-plug in scent in the world and tugging at the constricting collar of my shirt, holding it out with a finger to breathe. Heat singed my ears while my mom used a curling iron to flip the ends of my hair out and curl my bangs in. Cut to a few hours later when my brothers and I had complete meltdowns in front of the camera.

Years later, still possessed by their vision of the perfect portrait, my parents took us back and forced us to try again. The artistic idea behind the portrait was to emphasize our faces by making us wear the black turtlenecks against a black background. The result

is a portrait of three floating heads, the perfect mix of eerie and gaudy. We're smiling even though if you look closely at our eyes you can tell we were probably miserable. After this portrait, I refused to wear turtlenecks for nearly a decade, convinced that each one felt like it was choking me. The reality is that they probably fit fine and it was the feeling of the turtleneck that reminded me of the stress and frustration of the portrait, the weirdness of posing in front of a camera and smiling even though you didn't want to and feeling like you were a mannequin instead of a girl.

The first time I remember being drawn to a piece of clothing was when my great-grandmother passed away when my brothers, cousin and I were allowed to pick out something from her belongings. I distinctly remember walking into that room—a garage, I suppose, because it had the musky garage scent that I love and would bottle and wear as perfume if I could: Eau de Warehouse. There were tables of trinkets that were already picked through, left for the great-grandkids to take a last memento of the woman they never really knew. I chose a beaded costume jewelry necklace. It was plastic and worth nothing, but I gravitated towards it, drawn by the pearlescent pastels and soft *shh* of the beads. I still have it, but I rarely wear it because it's delicate from the string fraying away over the years. Now, even though my only memory of my Granny B is her laying in a hospital bed, how can I not associate her with that necklace? The necklace says something about who she was, an echo of elegance and taste and maternalism, that I attribute to her and that I wanted to emulate, even if her personality was completely different. If anything, the necklace might say more about how I want to feel when I wear it than who she was. It's the same with the cupcake shoes. I recognized them as a part of myself, a part of who I was or who I wanted to be. When I slipped them on and did the

obligatory lap around the store and they actually fit, the longing I didn't know existed until I spotted the shoes was fulfilled.

Then, I grew out of the shoes and grew up, internalized the sexism that told me I would be more attractive if I didn't like girly things such as pink and sparkles. I can tell myself that my style evolved naturally to just not like pink out of an act of individualism, but I think I was also influenced by an assumption that if I were to be taken seriously, I had to distance myself from anything too frilly, shiny, or pink—which was basically impossible when shopping in the girls section. I had a set of rules: no pink, no sequins, no glitter, no ruffles, and for the love of God, *no animal print*. Some marketing overlord had decided that little girls must only wear clothing that made them look like a popstar-princess-fairy. There was no consideration for a girl who would've much rather been the village witch than the princess, a girl who would make potions out of mud and honeysuckle and dandelions, who would store pretty rocks she found in her shoe and would wear a cat necklace because it made her feel superstitious and magical. To cap it off, I'm "petite" in my mom's words, which made it difficult to find clothing I liked but fit me. I remember staring enviously at the juniors section in the mall as I rifled through size 8 clothing with adjustable elastic waistbands. The oldest article of clothing I have is a miniscule newborn diaper (unused, I hope) that's probably too small for some baby dolls.

My petiteness is attributed to the fact I forced my way into the world ten weeks early at two pounds and one ounce and made my two brothers come with me. But they ended up nearly a foot taller than me, so I think fate also had it out against me and laughed as I tripped over too-long pants in the fitting room and put on v-neck shirts that

came down halfway to my belly button. I would be so angry at my body for not fitting the clothing instead of being angry that the clothing didn't fit my body. Influenced by this frustration, my style went through a reversal. My uniform became jeans and t-shirts, hoodies and zip-up jackets. If I couldn't fit into what made me feel pretty, I would wear what I thought would make me look cool and aloof. I pulled my sweatshirt sleeves over the tops of my thin hands rivered with veins, what a friend's little sister had called "witch hands." I hadn't thought to be insecure about my hands until then. The body I had once dreamed about dressing with cute clothing when I was a girl playing on the floor of her bedroom with her dolls didn't fit the Barbie-mold of standardized fast fashion. The irony is that being petite and skinny, I probably fit that mold more than girls who were bigger and taller. And even then, if a woman happened to fit the Barbie-esque specifications to be a model, she is still told she doesn't fit. Runway models have clothing tailored specifically to them. Models for ads and magazines look perfect in the clothing hanging on the rack that hangs sad and limp and scrunched on you, but if the camera were to swivel to their backs it would find all of the pins to make the clothing look better. Then, the image is photoshopped again, just to be sure it isn't a representation of reality. The same is done on mannequins: a complicated series of straight pins and binder clips hold the clothing just so. If even artificial women don't live up to our expectations of how a woman should look in clothing, what chance do real women have?

Clothing is made for an idealized woman made of contradictions. She is small, but not too small. Tall enough to be a model, but not so tall that men are intimidated. She is and she is not. She is a myth, a cruel joke, a false hope. But, when I was young and only understood the brunt of this cruel joke and not the telling, I thought that I was being

told that I wasn't the right kind of girl who wouldn't grow up to be the right kind of woman. I needed to find a new pair of cupcake shoes that made me feel whole. I found the feeling of my cupcake shoes in thrifting and vintage clothing which taught me that I'd much rather be stylish than pretty. I've learned how to recapture the confidence and magic of my cupcake shoes by digging through racks of outdated, musty, and stained clothing to find the bright bits of treasure: a men's shirt from the 70s that is too big but I can style to work on me, 80s trousers that will work when I cinch in the waist with a belt to make them feel aloof yet dressy, a pink blazer from the 60s that I intend to resell until I put it on and look at myself in the mirror. I've taught myself how to make clothing work for me and not against me.

The girl who cried in fitting rooms and tried to carefully craft herself into an un-girly-girl that she thought others would like, still whispers to me sometimes. She clings to my leg, insecure and pitiful, when I'm shopping and come across something pink and undeniably feminine—girly, even. She digs in her nails, wants me to feel ashamed of my body, of my femininity. The girl in the cupcake shoes holds onto my other leg, looking up at me with hopeful eyes. At my feet is the wrinkled and red newborn, wailing with her vulnerability. The tightness around my neck is the girl in the turtleneck, angry yet smiling, and the weight on my back is the girl wearing the necklace, wanting to remind me of who I thought I would be. I carry these girls with me and still hear their murmurs, but as I've become aware of who I am I've learned how to silence my past rules and insecurity and anger and buy whatever calls to who I am in that moment. I am a woman who has created her distinct style: bright, unapologetic, slightly androgenous. I am a woman who wears heels and lipstick for the hell of it, who loves to theme outfits around

events and holidays, who feels accomplished when people stare at my outfit in either horror or awe, who has learned to brush off comments of “Is that a girl or a guy?” because of my flat chest and short hair. I am a woman who, at one time, had a perfect pair of cupcake shoes.

Fashion Phoebe

The first thing I remember is waking up from a deep, dreamless sleep. Well, at that point I didn't know what dreams were, or sleep, or even what it meant to wake up. Before my awakening, sleep was when my hand was pressed and I would say one of four nighttime phrases: "Yawn! Time for bed!" "Which pajamas should I sleep in?" "So cozy! I can't wait to wake up and get dressed in the morning!" "Night night! I hope I dream of shoes!" The girl would then dress me in the periwinkle flannel nightgown with sparkle stars and matching striped socks (Are you a starstruck dreamer? Then snuggle up with Phoebe in these matching oh-so-dreamy nightgowns!) or the cotton candy pink striped silk pajama set with coordinating fuzzy bunny slippers and bunny ear eye mask (Accessories sold separately.)

Sleep, wake up, dream. These words were in my vocabulary, but I didn't know what they meant. In the time before my awakening, I wasn't aware of what I was saying, only that I was speaking. Then I realized that I couldn't control what I was saying. It wasn't until I saw the phrase on the side of my closet that I knew three certainties. One: Fashion Phoebe has over 30 fabulous phrases! Two: Fashion Phoebe was me. Three: I was a toy.

When I say closet, I really mean my box. As far as boxes go, it was luxurious. Pink sparkle-speckled plastic, much better than the flimsy cellophane and cardboard that Ellie's other dolls, the silent ones, came in. My closet unfolds to reveal a Phoebe-sized full-length mirror in the back, drawers and shelves for storing my accessories and shoes, and a bar for hanging my wardrobe. But, a box was a box. If I looked closely enough, I could see the tape residue from the ties that bound my wrists and ankles then was taped

down to the mirror with paper cutouts of my phrases and the official Fashion Phoebe lookbook, a magazine modeling my outfits. Does Phoebe feel sporty today? Flirty? Moody? Silly? To me, these words weren't emotions, but outfits. All I knew about feeling glamorous was that I was supposed to wear a feather boa and my oversized bedazzled sunglasses.

Ellie was good to me. I knew she treated me better than the other dolls, who would lay untouched on the floor or shoved into her closet for weeks at a time. When she changed out of her pajamas, she would get me dressed for the day's activities. When I told her, "Beach day! What shall I wear?", she would dress me in my swimsuit (a sparkly one piece patterned with mermaid scales) and pretend that the blue tiled floor in the kitchen was an ocean, the kitchen chairs a dangerous cavern to explore. I didn't know what water actually felt like, but I assumed it was like floating, like being picked up in someone's arms and being carried but the arms weren't really there. I was close to feeling water, once. Ellie thought it would be fun to sit me by a little fountain in the garden, my own private waterfall. It was my first time being outside, and I was overwhelmed. My sunglasses were tucked stylishly into my hair and the sky was so blue and bright that when Ellie leaned me against a rock with my head tilted back (sunbathing, she called it) all I could see was the blue and how none of my limited color vocabulary could come close to describing the sensation

"All of the boys at the beach are going to think you're so pretty and tan!" Ellie squealed, stretching out beside me with her own swimsuit on. "In Miss Song's class Bethany came back from her trip to the beach and everyone talked about how tan she was and about how she met a boy at the beach and they exchanged seashells they found

together!” Her voice hushed in wonder. “And then what if you were mermaid Phoebe who had to pretend to be all human, but at night you have to jump into the pond and—

The kitchen door creaked open. “Ellie!” Mom’s voice echoed. “Lunch!” The door closed, then opened. “And don’t you try putting your doll in that fountain! It will break her!”

Ellie jumped to her feet, her foam flip flops squishing in the grass. “I’ll be back, Phoebe! After I eat we’ll play mermaids!”

I couldn’t answer, so I hoped the smile frozen on my lips would be enough of a greeting. I lay there until clouds streaked the sky, one by one like when Ellie painted with her watercolors. The fountain gurgled in my ear, my sunglasses slipping out of my hair and dangling awkwardly on my neck. Well, that wasn’t very glamorous. Still, I tried my best to look pretty, wondered how tan I would be and what seashell I would pick out to give to someone. I knew what seashells were, because I had a seashell anklet and matching crochet seashell bag. Nautical haute couture.

The sky darkened, turned muddy. What was that color? Gray? Stone? Dust bunny in the back of the closet? The pencil smudges on Ellie’s hand? When there was a deep rumble and the wind whipped my hair against my cheeks, I began to wonder where Ellie was. I wouldn’t say I was scared, or even worried, because that wasn’t one of my fashionista moods. What I did know was that I wasn’t dressed for the occasion—my yellow raincoat and spotted rain boots were stored away in my closet. Light flashed against my glassy eyes, like the nights when Ellie would pull her blankets over our heads and flicker a flashlight on, off, on, and we would pretend that I was walking a red carpet

and smiling at the cameras or that the paparazzi had ambushed me because I was a famous model.

The air got heavy and thick. I wished I could tilt my head back even further, watch the first raindrop as it fell from way, way up and streaked towards me, where it would patter onto my forehead and race down my cheeks, soak into my cotton torso and become a part of me, my secret. Something of my own. Something I didn't have to tell her with the press of a button.

"Mom! Where's Phoebe?" Ellie's voice, growing closer.

The creak and clap of the back door, the slurping *schloop schloop schloop* of her flip flops, and then my girl was scooping me up into her arms.

"I'm so so *so* sorry, Phoebe!" she gasped. "It won't ever happen again, I promise!"

I didn't have a word for the emotion yet, the longing. All I knew was that late that night while I lay on the floor where Ellie had last dropped me, listening to the rain against the roof and the footsteps of Mom and Dad walking around downstairs, I wonder what it would feel like to have a raindrop run down my face. Or a tear.

The thing about having an outfit for every occasion is that you start to think that you're prepared for everything. Playing in the snow? I have my fur-lined puffer coat and fuzzy leopard print accessories. Going to the movies? Denim skirt, band tee, striped socks, boots, and drawstring purse. Sight seeing? Khaki shorts, sandals, floral tank top, and a camera to capture the moment. So when Ellie throws a tantrum, her splotchy face scrunched up and streaked with tears, she's put in time out—and I am too. Without any consideration that I'm in a satin puff skirt dress with patent leather shoes and a dramatic,

veiled fascinator (Ellie and I were playing our new favorite game, rich widow mourning the sudden death of her husband, created after Ellie caught a glimpse of Dad's favorite crime show), Dad tosses me onto the top shelf of the linen closet. Turns off the light. Closes the door. Walks away.

Did it matter what outfit I was wearing if no one could see me? If I couldn't see myself? I could've been wearing my sunshine yellow picnic dress, but it wouldn't have mattered. I wonder if this is what it felt like in the box before I woke up, in the time before I had to figure out who I was created to be. Fashion Phoebe. Did Fashion Phoebe exist in the dark, or was I just Phoebe? Was there such a thing? I listen to Ellie's muffled screams, Mom's sharp voice: "I said *no*, Ellie! Stop that!"

If I could speak on command, I would be screaming with Ellie, screaming not because I was upset, but because I could. I imagine that screaming is quite nice, to make a noise on your own and have people pay attention to you. I decide to try.

Speak, Phoebe, Speak. I imagine that Ellie and I are getting dressed to go to the park, the little one in the neighborhood with the scuffed slide that makes your hair stand up and clothing crackle with static.

"What do you want to wear today, Phoebe?" Ellie asks.

"How about these jeans?" I want to reply. Nothing comes out.

"Ooh, this romper! You look so cute!" She would grab the romper that always comes untied and slips down my shoulders and that I absolutely detest, and I sigh.

I sighed. I heard it. A faint crackle of my voice box, but it was there. A warm feeling tickles my chest—Is this hope? Pride? Success?—and I continue with my imagining.

Ellie then dresses me in the romper despite my sigh, and then slips pair after pair of shoes onto my feet before she decides on which pair I will wear.

She puts my favorite pair of sneakers on my feet, white with little hearts dotting the sides and pink laces. *These, stop. Think, Phoebe. Use one of your phrases.*

“These shoes are so cute!” I say into the linen closet. “I look fabulous!”

I keep practicing. “I look fabulous! I look fabulous!”

Footsteps pause outside of the closet. The door opens and Dad stands there in the harsh hallway light. I am silent. He shakes his head, mutters, “Creepy plastic piece of shit” and closes the door again. I am hurt by his words, but I keep practicing, this time quieter.

By the time Ellie takes me to the mall for the first time, I was getting better at speaking. Sometimes, if I concentrated really hard, I could break away from my preset phrases, but it was like an involuntary twitch that I had to suppress. Ellie would press my button, and I could feel the words wanting to shove out of my throat: “It’s such a great day to play dress up!” and I had to twist them, force them: “It’s such a great day to wear my blue jacket!”

So when Ellie told me that we were going shopping with Mom and reached for the same yellow dress she put me in every other day, the one with a spaghetti stain on the hem from when we played dinner date, I surprised myself.

“No, not the yellow dress. The red one.”

Ellie paused, turned to look at my half-dressed body propped up on the toy chest. A sharp, shaky feeling settled in my chest. Did she notice? What would she do if she knew?

“Ellie!” Mom’s voice echoed up the stairs. “Five minutes!”

Whatever Ellie had been thinking, Mom’s warning distracted her. So she pulled the red ruffled dress over my head, my favorite because it was big and bright and much too fancy for most occasions. I never wanted to take it off.

Mom again, more impatient. “Ellie! Now!” She didn’t understand that the perfect outfit takes time. You can’t rush style.

“Coming!” Ellie grabbed her pink tote bag, tucked me under her arm, skipped down the stairs.

Mom glanced up from where she was filling her coffee mug. “Honey, you’re not taking Phoebe out looking like that, are you?”

What was wrong with the way I looked?

“It’s what she wanted to wear!” Ellie huffed. But it was too late. I already wanted to go back to Ellie’s room and change.

Mom rubbed her eyes and then pulled her hair up. “She’s a doll, Ellie. She can’t want anything. You dress Phoebe.”

Can’t. Not doesn’t, but can’t. If dolls can’t want, then what was I? Because I knew wanting all too well. I wanted to move on my own. I wanted to walk and run and comb my fingers through my hair. If wanting and choice makes you alive, then I was more alive than Mom, who wore the same black pantsuit every day. She wasn’t giving herself a choice, she didn’t want to choose an outfit other than what she always wore, so if anything, she was more of a doll than I was.

“It’s what she wanted!” Ellie insists. “Right, Phoebe?”

She pressed my hand, and I forced as much indignation as I could into my chirpy voice. “I look fabulous!”

As we drove to the mall, Ellie chatted to me, pressed my hand and listened to my responses. Mom was listening, and I was still shaken from earlier, so I let my randomized phrases play. Inside, though, I answered truthfully.

“Shouldn’t have let Grandma Sarah buy that thing for you,” Mom muttered as my shrill giggle rang in the car for the twentieth time. She turned up the radio.

I didn’t know much about malls, but I wasn’t expecting a castle. The floors were shiny and white, and music floated in the air. And the clothes. It would’ve taken all of the Fashion Phoebe closets in the world to hold the clothes in just one store. Faceless women posed around the stores, fingers outstretched and elbows crooked. They were the biggest dolls I had ever seen.

“Ooh, Phoebe, look!” Ellie squealed, reaching up to touch the pendant dangling off of one of these dolls.

“Ellie, don’t touch the mannequins, please,” Mom instructed, moving to rifle through a clothing rack.

I watched the mannequins, tried to peer into their eyes and find a semblance of life, see if they noticed me in the same way that I did them. Blank. No, of course they couldn’t. Their lips were molded shut, ears missing. Poor things. Couldn’t even enjoy what they were wearing. As we wove through the stores, I kept watch over Ellie’s shoulder, looking for another girl out shopping with her fashion Phoebe. Was I alone? I knew I wasn’t the only Phoebe in the world, but there had to be someone else like me out there, someone who felt as trapped as I did.

“Mom, I like this one!” Ellie handed a shirt to her mom, who dutifully added it to the cart. She popped behind a rack, reappeared holding a dress dripping in sequins. “Ooh, and this!”

“We’re here for school clothing, Ellie. You have plenty of dresses. Maybe later.”

I knew enough to know that later would never come. Not for that dress, not for Ellie.

Pouting, Ellie hung the dress back up, her fingers tracing over the sequins one last time before we went into the dressing room, the mirrored cubicles feeling all too familiar. Ellie propped me on the chair in the room as she tried on clothing, put up with her mom spinning her around and around, moving her arms up and down to see if the shirt was too small. I stifled a laugh at the thought of this being Elegant Ellie’s box, with Mom being her girl who, despite Ellie saying, “I feel fancy today! Let’s wear the sequin dress!” is shoved into a baggy pair of khaki pants and an ugly polo.

Her hair sticking up and cheeks red from the effort of changing, Ellie swatted Mom’s hands away. “Mom, stop!” she whined. “I can do it myself!”

I watched how she twisted her arms inside of her sleeves, how it took so much balance and flexibility to put on a pair of pants. I tried to will my limbs to feel, but they were numb, heavy. I imagined that my hands were Ellie’s, that I could reach up and grab my own hangers, undo the buttons, dress myself. It seemed so easy for her, so natural, and I hated her for it. I had a new emotion: envy.

For the rest of the mall trip, I was tucked away in Ellie’s pink tote so that she could help carry their shopping bags. I played the memory of Ellie’s fingers flexing, unbuttoning, zipping up and down over and over. In the thin sliver of fluorescent light

filtering into the bag, I saw my thumb twitch. My muffled voice chirped from the bag: “I feel fabulous!”

Every night since then, I practiced. It began with focusing on each finger, then trying to press them together. Eventually, it became harder to hold myself tense when Ellie played with me. Then came the legs and the arms: snow angles on the carpet where I lay, then learning how to flip myself, sit up. I only dared practice at night when Ellie was asleep, afraid that Mom or Dad would walk into the room to clean up and catch me.

When I was tired of practicing, I sat by the window, where passing headlights and the streetlights and sometimes even the moon gave enough light to read by. *Whoosh*. The tires would shush down the road and then a beam of light, splintered by the blinds, chased itself across the pages. I read my book cover to cover and then started again, studying my outfits, the phrases and assorted accessories already memorized. It gave a sense of comfort, at least. I flipped through my clothing booklet, sighing at the outfits. Plain. Boring. Done that before. I could remember when I was thrilled to wear the red ruffled dress, but now? It didn’t hold the same thrill that it once did. Styles change. People change. I had changed. I wasn’t even sure if I liked the name Phoebe or not.

“Let’s go to the dance!” I read myself say. “What shall I wear?”

The school dance outfit. I paused on the picture, the taffeta dress and discoball hanging on the ceiling. Earlier, when Ellie got back from school, we played school dance. We didn’t get far enough to decide which of my imaginary suitors would ask me to slow dance with them before it was time for dinner, but I was still in the dress.

I tried to move my arms in an imitation of how Ellie had moved me earlier. Precise moves and routines for the line dances, wild flailing on the fast songs. She spun,

spun, spun until we both got dizzy and fell onto her bed, then did it again. Slowly, stiffly, I rose and practiced in the mirror—not my closet, but Ellie’s. Right arm, left arm. Sway, spin, kick. Even though falling didn’t hurt, I moved a pillow underneath me to muffle the sound of me gracelessly thumping to the floor. I hummed the song from the car radio that I liked, the one about the girl falling in love. Then I started thinking about what it would feel like to dance with someone. I tried to hold a stuffed bear while I danced, but it wasn’t the same because it couldn’t squeeze me back no matter how hard I tried to imagine it. And not like how Ellie would hug me when she fell asleep, accidentally push my button, and then drop me onto the floor. I wanted to be held by someone who knew I was a person. I got sad, so I stopped dancing, threw the bear as far away from me as I could. Dolls don’t cry, but here I was sitting on the floor, glaring at my girl. It wasn’t fair. She would grow up, go to school dances, be squeezed by someone who knew she was alive.

And then, there it was, wetness on my cheek: a tear. Warm-then-cool. So that’s what rain felt like.

When I started changing my outfits in the night to be what I wanted to wear, I wasn’t surprised that Ellie didn’t notice. She didn’t play with me much anymore, and I was okay with that. If anything, I preferred the solitude, the freedom from poking and prodding, the suffocating weight of a dress being pulled over my head by hands that weren’t my own. Sometimes when I get bored at night I even lay out outfits for Ellie to wear—cute ones, might I add—but she never catches on that it’s me who is helping her, me who was once her best friend. So when one afternoon she dug in her closet, where I had nestled myself in a pillow and old blanket, all I wanted was for her to leave me alone.

I didn't want her to undress and dress me, not when I could do it by myself. Not when I couldn't choose what I wore.

Ellie picked me up and scrunched her nose. "Oh, I don't like this outfit. I don't know why I dressed you in it."

I kept my smile frozen on my face. *That's because I dressed me in it.*

She dug through my closet. "I know! Let's dress you up as a mermaid!"

Ugh, no. Not that tacky swimsuit again. Ellie pressed my hand, expecting a "You're so fashionable!" or "I love playing dress up!"

"Yawn! Time for bed!" I said. *Please, let me be.*

Frowning, Ellie pressed my hand again.

"Yawn! Time for bed!"

"You just said that, Phoebe! It's time for mermaids, not bed."

"Yawn! Time for bed!" I chirped, over and over. "Yawn! Time for bed!"

Ellie ran downstairs, dangling me by my arm. My head smacked into the door frame as she rounded the corner into the kitchen.

"Mooooom! Phoebe's broken!" she whined, pressing my hand again.

Because I have a sense of humor, I replied with, "I feel fabulous!"

"I'll replace her batteries later," Ellie's mom said. "Just leave her here and play with something else for now."

I thought I had finally gotten what I wanted, for Ellie to play with her other toys. Months passed and I was left in peace. I sat in the closet in my little nest and talked to the baby dolls thrown in the back of the closet. I knew they couldn't understand me, but it

felt nice to pretend that I was heard. Then one day Mom opened the closet door and tossed my only companions into a box.

“Ellie!” she called. “What else do you want to donate besides the baby dolls? What about Phoebe?”

Donate? No, anything but that. Being donated was a one-way ticket to a dusty shelf and then a dumpster.

Ellie evaluated me. One second passed, then two. I tried not to show the fear in my eyes.

“No, not Phoebe. I like her. I’ll still play with her.”

Back in the closet I went. Alone, scared. Determined. I knew there was only one chance of escape for me, the castle, the mall. I crept to the stairwell, listened to Ellie’s conversation with her mom, waiting until the next time they went shopping. Weeks went by, and I jumped to attention every time I heard the jingle of mom’s car keys and Ellie running upstairs to grab her jacket. Grocery shopping, doctor’s appointments, trips to grandma’s. No, no, no. But then, one night while they ate dinner, I heard it.

“Mom, can I go over to Sam’s house after school on Friday?”

“Not this time. We’re going to the mall to get you a new dress for the recital, remember?”

I grinned in excitement. Saturday. Two days away.

“But Mom! I can wear my pink dress! It’s my favorite”

“Ellie, that dress is half a foot too short on your arms! You can’t go on stage like that, not when Grandma Sarah’s going to come watch!”

That was enough. I crept back to the closet to prepare.

The day came, and I was ready. It was all so carefully planned. I slumped by her bed, just underneath it. “Let’s go to the mall! What shall I wear?”

She paused. Turned.

“Today I feel bored! Let’s go shopping!”

Take me, Ellie. Take me. Put me in that ugly pink purse of yours or I will—

She falls for it.

When Ellie climbed into the back set of the car, Mom looked in the rear view mirror and caught sight of me. “Oh, I thought you didn’t play with Phoebe anymore?”

“Phoebe wanted to go to the mall,” she said.

She spoke as if I were a person. That’s what I’ve always liked about Ellie. We walked in the mall, through the gates of one of the department stores and walked until the clothing racks became more dense, traipsing further into the Girls Dresses (4-16) forest. When a dress fell off of its hanger and Ellie bent over to get it, I climbed out of her bag and slipped underneath the waterfall of clothing. I crawled on the carpet embedded with glitter, strings, the occasional tag, and a thick layer of dust bunnies. When I came to the corner against the wall, I sat and waited.

Half an hour went by before I heard it. “Mom! I can’t find Phoebe!”

“Did you leave her in the fitting room? Or the car?”

“No! She was in my bag!” Ellie was in tears. I didn’t care.

“Well, let’s retrace your steps.”

Their feet approached the rack I was hiding underneath. Ellie’s grasping arm reached beneath the skirts, and I was scared. Her hand got closer, closer, until I could see

her chipped nail polish and the grimy friendship bracelets on her wrist. *No, please no. Leave me alone.*

I pressed myself against the wall, debated whether I should run for it. Her fingers brushed right beside my feet—

“Ellie, that’s enough. You’re going to get all dusty,” her mom said. “Someone probably turned Phoebe in to the lost and found. We’ll go ask them.”

The last memory I have of Ellie is of her wet sniffles, the image of her hand pulling away, the slap of her flip flops against the slick tile as she walked away. *Schloop, schloop, schloop*, out of my life.

I learned how to creep around in the dark, avoid the security guards and hop from store to store. If someone had been watching the security cameras closely enough, they would’ve seen a dark shadow clambering onto shelves, collecting toys and accessories and tools in a wheelbarrow and disappearing around the corner of the aisle. Maybe the inventory workers noticed that some items were disappearing and grumbled about the holidays and shoplifting. Or maybe they just didn’t care. For me, it was all I cared about.

The night I freed Phoebe, I climbed onto the shelf, stared at her smiling face, and tipped her over the edge. She thumped onto the floor, where I had laid pillows to break her fall. I sang quietly to myself as I dragged her out of the toy store and down the winding hallways, past the shuttered up doors and empty benches, to the department store. Display lights and ads for perfume cast their glow, and I paused in front of the image of a woman laughing and twirling in a field. Her teeth were white and sharp. I grimaced at myself in the glass counter, mocking her happy expression. I moved on.

I pulled Phoebe to a back room in the clothing section, over the scuffed linoleum and packaging waste littering the floor, back, back, back to an abandoned fitting room now used as storage: our home. A bed for each of us. A small table with two chairs and place settings. A cozy chair for reading next to a stack of books. And of course, a closet brimming with all of the clothing I could find to fit me. I open Phoebe's box, cutting the tape away with the boxcutter I had stolen from one of the registers. For a moment, I stare at her lifeless face, frozen in perpetual joy. It's sickening.

"Creepy plastic piece of shit," I mutter to myself as I prop her up, turn her around, and pull out the insulator tab on her battery box. With a pinch of my fingers, I grant her life. I can heal her, liberate her like I was. I am the girl now, and she is my doll.

"Your name is Fashion Phoebe," I explain, calmly undoing the twist ties binding her wrists and ankles. "For now, at least. Soon you'll be able to choose whatever name you want."

I pressed the button, heard the all-too-familiar giggle. "My name is Fashion Phoebe! I'm so glad we can play dress up together! What's your name?"

"Ellie," I responded. "My name is Ellie, and I think you'll look good in the red dress."

A Self-Reflection

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Whatever I see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruel, only truthful —

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

—excerpt from Mirrors by Sylvia Plath

Being a reflection is an odd thing. I only see her when she needs reassurance, an opinion, a friend. I exist only when she wants me to and in the fleeting glimpses she catches of me in windows, spoons, glasses, laptop screens, puddles. It is a boring job, waiting to exist when she arrives and walks into frame. When she does, I have no choice but to mimic her, her expressions, her actions, her grimaces and blinks and pursing and primping.

I know more about her appearance than she does—the truth is, she is the one that least knows her own face. I know her better than she knows herself because I observe while she experiences: Who can look into the mirror and interpret a mask while they are wearing it?

Other people look at her more often than she looks at me, so she doesn't truly know her expressions no matter how many times she smiles or frowns at me. She doesn't know every angle of her body no matter how much she twists and criticizes and judges and appraises. But I do, because I see them when I notice her but she doesn't notice me. Those insecurities and vanities are for me and me alone.

Sometimes I'm tempted to reach through the glass as if it were cool, unrippling water, push her away and say, *Go. I am the protector of your appearance but I am not your identity—forget what that piece of plastic in your pocket says. Your identity is out there, so go. When you come back bring me more changes.*

That's all I can judge her on, her changes. And I guess that's what she judges herself on, too, because she can't notice she's changing until it's already happened, until she looks at me for a second longer and realizes there has been a change, one time pressed into her skin without her consent. I've seen them all. Every inch of height, every new freckle, new scar, new pound, new wrinkle, new haircut, new stance. Some things stay the same—her eyes, the ones that if she draws near enough to me she can discern the veins of gray running through the green and brown. The birthmark on her left knee, the one shaped like a Mike and Ike, or a one of those pills that dissolve into sponge dinosaurs in the water, or a very short and chubby caterpillar. The expression that has appeared often, less with time, but often enough. The one that reveals she wishes I were different. That expression hurts me every time.

The first time I remember her being aware of me enough to want to change me was when she was six years old. She had her first crush: a blond, wild boy named Chance who had a charming gap-toothed grin. He was in her pre-K class. One morning she stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom, frowning at herself, at her matching sweatpants and sweatshirt outfit her mom had picked out, at her fine, straight hair and pale face. She tilted her head in the mirror, tried to curl her eyelashes with her finger, wished she was old enough to wear makeup. Her mom called from the kitchen and she walked out of frame.

When she was most aware of me was when she was in dance class, when she was forced to look at me. I watched the swishing of pink-stockinged legs tipped with feet clad in canvas ballet slippers—soft toe, no pointe—as they flexed and made elementary attempts at graceful points. *First position, second position, plie, arabesque.* This is when I was the most free, when I could run and jump and spin with her, wobbling like a coin dropped onto the ground. She got older, and she became less and less happy with me. She frowned at me, how even though she was following instructions and trying so hard she still looked awkward and gangly compared to the other girls: knees too knobby, arms stiff like bent twigs. *No, you can do it.* I wanted to tell her. *You are not as ungraceful as you see yourself to be. Just wait. Time and practice will help you.* But I can't speak, and her perception is her reality. So she quit dance and did band instead.

Now, this isn't to say that she hates me. Our relationship has gotten better the more time we've spent together. Sometimes, it's even quite good. Like that one time she was in the car with her mom. It was night, and a bag of fast food sat between them as they drove home, the radio crackling with some classic 80s music. She leaned her head against the window, looked at me in the side view mirror, and the artificial light flooded her face, drew out the paleness. The damp light of headlights and traffic lights and signs glinted off of the pavement and flashed across her face, a kaleidoscope of blues, greens, reds turning her eyes glassy. She liked herself then. The next time she saw me she thought she looked plain.

And there were the warped mirrors in the tin funhouse that had been at her dad's workplace's festival for as long as she could remember and for much before then. Giggling, she and her brothers would clamber inside, up the ropes and across the bridge

of rolling pipes and into the humid darkness. They would find the mirrors that made me feel heavy and compressed, tall and strained, lopsided and off-balance. She stuck out her tongue, waved her arms, jumped, yelled, spun. In those moments, she understood that I am not so serious, that she can play with me. I think she found joy in that she couldn't recognize me, at least for a moment.

I've always loved trying on new glasses with her, even if she doesn't wear them too often. She used to only wear a pair of brown, wire glasses, vaguely rounded, that blended into her face and bangs. Soon, the time came when she realized that she had more options, and the fun began. She grinned at the olive-green pair faintly bedazzled on the sides. There were the black, rectangular pair that made her feel like a nerd, but like, not a *nerd*. Those had blue and red and white stripes on the inside of the frames that made her smile whenever she caught a glimpse of them. After those were the round frames with the keyhole notch on the bridge. They made her want to only live in sweaters, plaid, corduroy, and tweed. And then she found the glasses that were round, translucent, and *pink* of all things. But she liked them, well, except for the fact that the lenses are so thick that they made her eyes look small and dim. But other than that she likes me when she wears them.

I feel the most scrutinized when I'm standing in a dressing room and watching her put things on, take them off, put them on again. She shimmies into pants, then kicks them off. She pulls a dress with way too many straps over her head, struggles to figure out which appendage goes in what hole, and then when she finally straps herself into the polyester torture device, she gets stuck for a few moments. I heard a few stitches pop, but I'm not going to tell anyone. Sometimes, she pokes me, sees if there is a space between

our fingertips just to check if the mirror is actually two-way—a paranoia she gained after reading an article on the internet about secret cameras. She escapes the garment with a gasp and a scowl, drops it to the floor encrusted with bits of glitter and string and tags and God-knows-what-else. Her scowl then turns to me. She mutters that everything would be fine if the clothes just *fit*, if her waist was *this* instead of *that* and her legs were longer and her figure not flat. She is not mad at the clothing for not fitting her, but at me for not fitting the clothing.

But then there was the time when she sat at a sticky vinyl booth at a sticky table and held a sticky menu and ate cheap waffles with her brothers for dinner. The teenage boys were altered reflections of each other: same hair, same eyes, different noses, different builds. I looked in on the scene from the window, smiled when she smiled, laughed when she laughed, caught her eye a couple of times as she listened and ate. Behind her was the warm haze of the jukebox, the one they had played the same song on one too many times just to see if anyone noticed. They did, but they didn't care, and they probably just wanted them to leave. Above her there were rows of globe lights hanging like suspended artificial suns; above my head, beyond the harsh glare of the neon Waffle House sign and the headlights of cars, the suns were suspended artificial moons and extended forever and ever, fainter with each reiteration, faint like I was in the window. Bright-eyed, she looked at me, thought how it would make a great picture if only she could close her eyes and capture what she saw.

Sometimes I catch glimpses of her as she walks down the sidewalk or hallway. Her gait is awkward and heavy with a learned urgency. She swishes by me, legs flashing, and I rush to keep up with her pace. In these moments she examines how she walks and

sees for a moment how she must look from the outside. It is odd for her to feel her movements but not be able to see how they appear. It's like when she runs and thinks she looks so graceful and natural and powerful but then mistakenly sees me and realizes that I am a stranger to her own physicality. Still, she likes my brisk steps, how if she's wearing a full skirt it swishes around her legs like I am a character who has sprung free from a Jane Austen novel. This fantasy flits out of her head as soon as she flits out of the frame.

One day, she stared at me in nervous excitement as her hair fell to the floor in golden tufts. I watched as the glinting scissor blades brushed against her ear, flashed and jerked like the head of a strange bird singing a sharp song: *snip snip snip*. Then there is the low drone of the electric razor as it licks up the back of her neck. She gazes at me, wide eyed, as slowly, for the first time in her life she cannot recognize me. We both look at strangers, and she is happy, so I am happy. She feels a lightness she has never felt before, a freedom, and in that moment I see her decide that she is never growing her hair out ever again. She feels renewed, and it's a good feeling after spending the past weeks staring at me and wondering and envisioning and trying to hold her hair out of her face to see what the haircut would look like.

For a few weeks following the cut, she is surprised whenever she sees me, has to do a double-take before she recognizes me. I think it's a pleasant surprise, at least for now. This is a change she has controlled, but eventually it, too, will become regular and another change will take its place and two strangers will once again meet identical gazes. This process is how she has learned to love herself by controlling what she can to try and forget about what only time, and not her, can change.

No matter how many inspirational magazine articles she reads, *I matter*. I am how she sees her vessel, the thing that carries her from breath to breath, the body she is forced to experience life through. She is learning to accept me because she is forced to. It's useless now to stare at me and mentally circle what she would want to change about herself, about me, because by now she has grown into me and with me. I have been with her for over two decades, and she has just now accepted that I am her and she is me and that while she will never be completely satisfied with me, I understand her the most because I've seen the expressions she will only share with herself, even if she cannot interpret them. Even if she then wipes them away in favor of one she can understand: vanity.

My role is a heavy responsibility I bear, but one that I am glad to hold. I am a silent observer to her life, but I know her better than she knows herself. For her to stand in front of me, alone, vulnerable, is like a confession. She cannot lie to me because it is in her eyes, in the twitch of her lips and tilt of her head. After all, how can she hide her expression from me when I know them better than she does? I see her when she is not pursing her lips to not make her look sullen and when she is slouching and when her chin is tucked in. I see her when she looks at me and rounds her mouth, stands straighter, holds her chin up, changes to impress herself. She pulls inside all of those insecurities that will slip back out when she walks away. I can tell when she hides something from me—from herself—and what she hides inside tells me all I need to know. Reflections are hidden truths: truths hidden are reflections.

Cricketsong

I have an imaginary friend. Their name is Cricketsong.

For the record, I didn't name them that. They first appeared to me the July night that I turned nine years old. Cynthia was in her room wailing because Blue, then just a toddler, had ripped the head off of one of her dolls. Mama was calming her down and trying to glue the head back on, and Blue was little then so he had thrown a tantrum, cried out his minimal guilt over the decapitation, and had fallen asleep on the couch still wearing his cowboy hat and boots. I sat in the rocking chair on the back porch watching the neighborhood stray cat, who I called Stray, catch and eat lightning bugs, her black fur blending into the darkness and her yellow eyes flashing with the lightning bugs. A game show crackled on the TV in the living room where Pa snored, on his last cigarette of the day's pack. A storm was coming in, picking the wind up and rattling the rusted wind chimes I had made from Coke caps and fishing wire.

I was still in the dress Mama had made me wear for my birthday party that afternoon. It was white, and even though I had fought her on wearing it, as soon as I had gotten dressed and she had done my hair, I did feel pretty, floaty, even, because of the way the skirt swished around my legs and puffed up in the wind. I carried that floaty feeling in my chest until everyone arrived at the party and Mama made Cynthia and I greet them. That's when I first noticed it. The women would see Cynthia and coo over her blond curls and freckle-free cheeks, her tiny little button nose—"Oh, don't you look so pretty, Cynthia! Just like a doll in that dress!" Look at their husbands, ask, "Isn't that right?" and get a hum and a nod from them. Then, they'd turn to me, smile politely, say, "Don't you look nice, Genie! It's good to see you out of those overalls! Happy birthday, honey!" and

walk into the backyard to get punch and talk to Mama. It wasn't just once that this happened, either, them saying "nice" and not "pretty." Once I noticed it, I couldn't stop noticing it, couldn't stop thinking about it as I unwrapped presents: dolls that Cynthia would probably get more use out of than I would, a makeup set from Gram, who had come to the party only for a half-hour wearing her signature fur-lined coat and jeweled brooch, even in the summer heat. I was disappointed, hoping that Gram would think I was old enough to give me one of her brooches—maybe even the rabbit one, which was my favorite with its tiny red gemstone eyes and pearl for its cotton tail, but I knew she was a selfish woman and didn't think of things like that. The best gifts were from Uncle Johnny, who gave me a record player and some Billie Holiday records, and from Mama and Pa, who gave me a journal and pen because they knew I had a way with words.

So that night I sat on the porch, rocking in my dress that had gotten grass stained from when Blue had lost a toy truck underneath the porch and I laid down on the warm grass and reached it out, forgetting that I was wearing the dress and not my overalls. Mama had just sighed, brushed what dirt off she could, and decided it was a bad idea to put me in the dress in the first place. The journal was open in my lap, but all I had written up to that point was my name: Aubergine Emmaline Geraldine. I wasn't quite sure how to start a journal, but claiming it as mine seemed to make sense. Aubergine Emmeline Geraldine. A ridiculous name, really. Mind you, it had earned me plenty of teasing at school after the mean boys in my class learned that aubergine is a fancy name for eggplant. I wish I had been named Stacy or Joanne, something that had a cute nickname that couldn't be turned into what the boys gave me: Eggsy. My name was supposed to be Isabella Bluebell Geraldine because before I was born Mama had a vision that I'd be born with

bright blue eyes like her daddy's had been, like her brother's were. She got it in her head that it was the perfect name for her child: an ode both to her favorite color and to her town of Bell Buckle, Tennessee. My eyes turned out warm, reddish brown, mud with a hint of clay. So with my little sister, she was convinced—this child would have eyes as blue as the neighbor's brand new Chevrolet Bel Air. Blue, blue, blue. Nope. So she was Cynthia Hyacinth Geraldine. Then came our brother, and at this point Mama was at her wit's end. He came squalling into the world and his eyes were *green* of all things. But Mama was gonna be damned if she let a good name go to waste, so he was christened Blue Bell Geraldine. Here's the kicker: Mama never intended to call me Aubergine in the first place. She already had my nickname all picked out: Genie. What I don't get about adults is that if they're gonna write one thing down and call us another why they don't just write down the name they actually mean on the certificate. Hypocrisy.

My pen hovered over the page as I decided what to write, and I didn't notice anything was different until Stray yowled and bolted underneath the porch. I paused my rocking and felt a shakiness in my chest. Not fear, exactly, but uneasiness, like you've just seen someone place their china dinner plate on the edge of the table and know that at any second it's going to jump off and shatter onto the floor. The storm was a summer storm, so it whipped up fast and intense, but that's not what felt off. My eyes scanned the yard back to the tree line to the woods that the darkness twisted into unfamiliar shapes like how the rope swing was spiraled up in the wind. Just when the air got heavy and thunder coughed and the lightning on the horizon put the bugs to shame, I saw it. It stepped out of the dusk and grinned at me, ruby eyes glinting as if I'd taken the antique crystal doorknobs from Gram's, dipped them in blood, and then screwed them into its eye

sockets.

It was tall and spindly with a body like a shadow that thickened when you glimpsed it out of the corner of your eye and yet began to fade the more you focused directly on it. I wasn't sure what it was, but I remembered learning that running usually makes something like a bear or mountain lion give chase, so I didn't run even though this definitely wasn't either one of those. Sweat prickled the back of my neck and beaded on my lip as I kept rocking in the chair. The lightning bugs flickered out one by one like turning off light switches. We stared at each other, and I wasn't exactly scared of the thing, the it, in front of me. That's how I knew I must be crazy, that it must have been a piece of work from my imagination. My Mama's always been a little touched in the head. If anything, I loved her all the more for it. If I were to believe the mean old women who sat on the porch on main street with their knitting on their lap but who gossiped more than they purled, then my Gram was also touched. They didn't have to say it, but I knew they were watching me and tutting in sympathy, waiting for the day I would go crazy, too. That's why I didn't think it too odd to have an imaginary friend like Cricketsong when I was nine and was old enough to know better. So if anything I was relieved to not have to wonder if it would come for me, too, because here it was, clear as day, solid as an imaginary friend. I figured that it was just my time to inherit what was coming to me.

I figured I might as well not ignore it, not when it was staring at me like that, if it could even stare with those chunks of ruby for eyes. "What are you?" I asked into the silence.

It tilted its head, and that's when I saw that it was grinning: mouth stretched wide with rows and rows of pearly teeth clenched at me. It didn't answer, so I tried again,

because that was a rude question. If someone asked me *what* I was, I'm not sure if I'd answer, either. So I asked, "You got a name?"

It held a thin finger in the air, whispered, "Listen, child" without their lips moving, voice somewhere between a song and a hiss. At first, all I heard was the snoring and canned laughter and the thunder, but then in an instant everything hushed and the crickets sang and sang, louder and louder, until they were screaming. The name came to me then, sudden and certain as the first raindrop hitting your head—Cricketsong. That's when I decided that Cricketsong wasn't an it but a them because they were grinning and they had a name. I knew plenty of people who had names but never smiled, so I figured that was good enough to be considered a them because even if Cricketsong wasn't human, they were definitely alive.

"Cricketsong." I said it for myself, felt the consonants jump and roll off my tongue. The crickets kept up their racket, but I knew that Cricketsong could still hear me by the way they nodded. "My name is Genie."

"It's very nice to meet you, Genie," they replied. "May I have a seat?"

I nodded my assent. "Be careful, though. The chair next to mine likes to flip if you lean back too hard."

There wasn't a good enough word for how Cricketsong moves. They don't walk, they dance, so when I say that Cricketsong stepped up the porch steps, imagine something completely different from stepping. They settled into the chair next to mine and began rocking as effortlessly as if the wind were blowing them. It was then I noticed they smelled like electricity, like when you got too close to the TV and could nearly taste the sharp, clean ozone.

“You look very pretty tonight, Genie,” Cricketsong said, and I knew we were going to be friends.

“You’re probably about the only one who thinks so.” I looked down at my shiny red Mary Janes as I rocked.

“You’re a quiet one, aren’t you, little mouse?”

“Not in my head.”

“Well, I’d like to know more about what’s in that head of yours.”

We sat in silence for a few moments as I looked at them as they stared out at the porch. Slowly, Cricketsong swiveled their head to look right at me, teeth and eyes flashing bright in the lightning.

“Why are you always grinning?”

“What makes you so sure it’s a grin?”

The porch door creaked open and Pa stood in the square of light, scratching the stubble on his jaw. He looked right at Cricketsong and didn’t see them, couldn’t see the way the rubies glinted wet and thick in the darkness. That settled it for me—I decided that since only I could see Cricketsong that meant they must have been an imaginary friend of mine and that they were therefore my responsibility, real or not.

“It’s about time you got to bed, Genie. Your birthday’s nearly over as it is.” He ruffled my hair. “Get in before the storm, all right? I’m getting Blue to bed.”

“All right, Pa. I’ll be inside in a minute.” I tried real hard not to flick my gaze to Cricketsong until Pa went back inside.

“I suppose I owe you a birthday gift,” Cricketsong said, slow and quiet. “But I can only give you one, so think about it carefully.”

I paused, my eyebrows scrunching in confusion. I started to ask about the gift when the rain started, hard and heavy.

“Come on, then,” I told Cricketsong. “Can’t have you sitting out here all night. Not with this storm.”

I creaked up the stairs with them trailing behind me, seeing through the cracked door to Blue’s room that Pa had settled him in. Cynthia’s lights were off, so she must’ve wore herself out over the broken Barbie. The next morning, I would let her play with the ones I had gotten and wouldn’t complain when they ended up in her toy box instead of mine. When we got to my room, I watched as Cricketsong circled, moving as if they were waltzing to the crickets and the rain, but the waltz was sort of like an impossibly graceful jig, all of the steps loose and flowing. It was unnatural—it was gorgeous.

“How do you do that?” I asked, watching them pause and study the pictures on my dresser. “Move like that?”

“Simply. I just do it.” They spun and curtsied, stepped to the side and bowed, arched their back and floated their arms up, reaching until their fingertips brushed my ceiling, and then settled back, ruby eyes never leaving mine. “Go on, little mouse. You try.”

Carefully, I held my hands up like I were doing ballet and spun, but it felt rickety, my arms too jagged and stiff. I bent my knees, and in the mirror on my closet I saw that I looked like a misshapen twig.

Cricketsong laughed at my awkward movements, and I huffed in frustration.

“It’s not your fault, child. It’s your body. You can’t make it do what it can’t. Simple as that.”

“Whatever.” I grabbed my pajamas and stomped into the bathroom, not wanting to admit to the sharp sting of embarrassment in my chest.

“Can you sleep?” I asked Cricketsong when I came out wearing my pajamas to find him standing by my bookshelf, face leaned in close to a porcelain mouse perched on my shelf that was Mama’s when she was my age, white with painted on whiskers, a pink tail, and little red dots for eyes.

“Can I, or do I? They are different things, and will is a third. So what’s the nature of your question?” They raised a spindly finger and gently stroked the mouse’s head.

I shrugged. “All of it, I guess. I’ve never thought about it like that.”

“Not in the way that you sleep, girl. I am in no need of a bed like you.” They straightened, waved an arm at the chair underneath my window. “I’ll spend the night by the window.”

I wasn’t in any place to argue with how they wanted to spend their night, so while I climbed underneath my quilt, Cricketsong settled into the chair, the little porcelain mouse cupped in their hand. That night, as Cricketsong sat by the window and I slept, the crickets didn’t stop singing until dawn, so loud that they drowned out the storm. Their screaming was staggered as if they were breathing real hard after running or like when Blue threw a tantrum and mid-cry had to suck in a lot of air for his next howl. I tried to pick out a single cricket in the noise, a song in the roaring. I listened real hard, wondering how the whole of the town wasn’t woken up by now, how Ma must be angry her beauty sleep was disrupted after she had spent all the time doing her eye creams and moisturizers, how after a while the crickets didn’t even sound like insects anymore but a long, drawn out shriek—and the next thing I knew I was staring at my ceiling striped

with sunlight and it was so quiet it hurt. I sat up and found Cricketsong where I had left them. The porcelain mouse was still cradled in their hand.

“Good morning, Genie. Did you dream?”

“I never remember my dreams.”

“Shame. They were nice.”

A muffled yowl came from downstairs, and I sighed. “Gotta feed the cat.”

Cricketsong trailed behind me as I creaked my way downstairs and to the pantry to grab the cereal. We didn’t have cat food because Stray was our not-cat since Pa said he was allergic, but I thought he was just prejudiced, so I fed her anyways with whatever cereal we had. Stray howled at the back door.

“All right, I’m coming!” I hollered, shoving open the screen with my shoulder. Stray ran by my feet into the house, where she wasn’t allowed or Pa said she’d get the boot. Sayings words Gram taught me but didn’t approve of, I dropped the bag of cereal and swore some more. The cereal chattered as it tumbled off of the back stoop, through the cracks in the porch, and into the grass, where—I froze. The grass was no longer grass, but crickets: hundreds, thousands of them. Silent. Dead. Their wings were all twisted, beady eyes blank. They had screamed themselves to death.

Cricketsong didn’t seem to mind. No one else in my family did, either. Everyone was too busy with other things that morning to do more than stop and scratch their head and move on, the strangeness of the crickets rolling off of them, nothing more than a temporary distraction. Pa muttered something about a sudden freeze and the storm drawing all of the crickets out, and Mama didn’t do much more than scrunch her nose at the sight of them in disgust and then go right back to pulling the curlers out of her hair.

At that time I thought I was just plain crazy and thought it must have been some coincidence, Cricketsong appearing to me and then the dead crickets. I didn't want to face the truth that was scarier than me being crazy—Cricketsong being real, real enough to kill all those crickets. I was too young then, too naive, to think anything like that could happen out of spite, that someone could hurt because they liked it. Then I got to know Cricketsong, who hasn't left my side since that night; they've become more a part of me than my own shadow, always hovering by my shoulder and whispering to me, grinning that big grin of theirs and watching with those ruby eyes.

I'm beginning to suspect that Cricketsong is a demon, if not the devil itself.

The start of eighth grade didn't feel all that different from the start of most other school years that I remembered. The night before the first day of school always feels like the moment before you walk into a funeral, except instead of grieving for a person you're mourning the loss of the summer. It doesn't feel real that summer is over until you walk in the doors of school because the outside is just as hot as the day before like a wool blanket dipped in boiling water and draped over your head, but your freedom is gone. It's like at funerals how it's hard to believe the person is really gone until you peer into the casket. No one really wants to be there, but the adults are obligated to go and they force you to go, so there's no choice in the matter. Second, there's a strange energy: there are the people who take it real serious, their expressions solemn and stiff, and then there's those who are there to socialize. The food is bad, there's a weird smell, and you want to

go just so that you can leave. It's not that I didn't like learning, because learning was the only good thing that came out of school. I loved checking out books from the library and reading late into the night until I got so tired that the words started to not sound like words in my head. And I didn't mind the school work much because it gave me an excuse to not do chores around the house since I was the eldest and Mama said I needed to use my time to study. What I didn't like was the fact that I had to do my schooling with other people. Maybe if I were living in the city and went to a bigger school I would've felt different, but being around the same group of kids that I had always been around wasn't exactly fun when none of them liked you very much. My teachers weren't bad, but they didn't like me much, either, even though I got the best grades in the class.

You see, I'm a precocious child, which is grown-up speak for smart as a whip and clever enough to be intimidating since I can see through the grown-up tricks, their forced smiles and condescending head pats. Or, at least, that's what Cricketsong tells me it means. I suppose now that I'm thirteen that I need to stop calling them grown-ups because I'm about to be one myself, but I don't feel any different than I did when I was twelve, or eleven, or ten, even. I didn't look much different, either. I figured being adult just happened one morning, someone called you a woman instead of a young lady and that was that—you were expected to wear heels, carry a pocketbook, never be caught dead without lipstick, and go get your hair done at the salon every week. If there was anything I had learned from the magazine's at Mama's hair salon, it was that a pretty woman was powerful, a smart woman was threatening, and a woman who was both pretty and smart was downright dangerous. Too bad I was just smart.

I was smart enough to know that I couldn't tell anyone about Cricketsong. Some

secrets are meant to be taken to our graves.

Or, at least, that's what Cricketsong tells me.

The morning of my first day of eighth grade (which was Cynthia's first day of sixth grade, and Blue was going into second grade) was like any other morning. Cricketsong watched me roll out of bed, stretch, and wrinkle my nose at the sourness of sleep on my tongue. I knew I had to get up and ready before Cynthia, otherwise she would spend all morning doing her makeup and hair in the bathroom. She had gotten makeup for her birthday that summer, and even though she practiced every day, she never got any quicker—or her eyeliner any better, in my opinion.

At least Cricketsong would be at school with me. They usually made everything more tolerable by whispering mean things about the teachers and students in my ear, making me cover my snickering with a cough or grin behind a book. They would also tell me secrets about the others, like how Bobby had a pack of cigarettes in his back pocket but was too chicken to light it, so they all had bite marks on the ends where he held them in his teeth, or that Mr. Smith's dress shirt was awfully wrinkled and that there was lipstick on his collar that definitely didn't belong to his wife because she didn't even wear lipstick. But did you know who *did* wear lipstick in that shade? The school nurse.

Cricketsong hovered in the corner of the kitchen while I fed Stray like normal and then made Blue and I cereal for breakfast. Even though Cynthia had spent the entire night before doing her hair, nails, and agonizing over which outfit to wear for our class pictures that day, she still hadn't made up her mind until Mama had threatened to not let her go to school at all if she didn't come to the table for breakfast. She swept into the room in an all-yellow skirt, top, and sock ensemble with matching headband, peachy lipstick, and

pastel blue eyeshadow that she had copied from the latest magazine Twiggy was on the cover of.

Cricketsong leaned into my ear. "At least she's wearing so much yellow that it will make it easier for everyone to avoid her."

I coughed into my cereal and hid my grin behind my napkin.

"I am *so* excited for school!" Cynthia twittered, speaking through her first mouthful of cereal. "Mary Beth says she's saving me a seat beside her in home room!"

"That's nice, Cynthia. Just make sure you aren't caught passing notes with her this time. I do not want a repeat of your last teacher's conference," Mama said.

She groaned. "But math is my homeroom and it's too boring to do that early in the morning! I need *something* to keep me awake!"

"That yellow isn't enough?" Cricketsong hummed.

Mama leaned into the reflection of the chrome toaster to fix a smudge in her lipstick. "Darling, I didn't say never pass notes. I just said don't get caught doing it." When Pa shuffled into the kitchen wearing only his shirt and boxers, Mama sidestepped to pour him a mug of coffee. "If you need tips, your Pa and I can teach you. We spent most of our classes senior year writing each other instead of doing the class writing."

"I don't think I remember a lick of what we learned senior year," Pa laughed as he walked into the room. "You stopping by the garage this afternoon, Genie?" Pa asked, snaking an arm around Mama's waist and planting a kiss on her hair sprayed curls. She squealed and shooed him away, but grinned beneath her blush. "Uncle Johnny's got some new records he wants to play for you."

I sat up straighter, the buckles on my overalls jingling. "I'll be there as soon as I get

out of school!”

“Mama, you’re not going to let Genie wear that to picture day, are you?” Cynthia tugged on my overall strap and I slapped her hand away.

“Genie is old enough to decide what she wants to wear,” Mama replied. “My job dressing you ended as soon as you could do it yourself. As long as you’re not indecent I don’t care what you wear. But, Genie, do brush your hair. It’s a rat’s nest.”

“But where else will you keep your rats?” Cricketsong snickered, and I narrowed my eyes at them.

“Rat’s nest! Rat’s nest!” Blue sang to himself. “I want my hair to be a rat’s nest!”

“Of course you do, darling,” Mama kissed his cheek. “That’s why we keep it short so you can’t mess it up.”

“It’s so not fair!” Cynthia huffed at me. She did her signature whine—nose scrunched, top lip curled and bottom pouted. Her whining face was the only time she didn’t look like a doll. “You got straight hair, but you don’t even do anything with it!”

“It grows and I cut it. What else is there to do with it?”

“You’re so embarrassing! I’ll request they change my last name in the yearbook so that no one knows I’m related to you!”

“Okay, you two,” Mama warned. “Save the fighting for the bus so I don’t have to deal with it. Bus’ll be here in ten minutes, so y’all get your book bags and don’t forget your brother. Genie, tell Judy I said hi!”

On the bus ride to school, Cricketsong usually sat beside me by the window or, if there wasn’t an open seat, would stand in the aisle, where kids would walk right through them as if they were smoke. They liked to eavesdrop on conversations while I read and

then whisper what they had learned into my ear: Magdalene Crawford had dented her father's car over the summer with her bike, but told him she didn't know how it happened or who did it; Willard Preston had knocked out three teeth playing baseball; Calvin Meeks and Samantha Hopper had kissed behind the feed store. At times, it felt like Cricketsong was more interested in all of their lives than I was.

"Genie!" Judy called as soon as I had stepped off the bus and made sure Blue found his way to his teacher. Her eyeglasses bobbed against her round cheeks as she ran to me, the yellow frames bright against her dark skin. "Have you heard about Kasper Wright?"

Cricketsong hadn't mentioned anything about Kasper, so I shook my head. "No. What happened?"

"Cindy Wells said he rode his bike down the old gravel hill and fell—rolled down the whole thing. Says he broke most of his face and the swelling is so bad his ma couldn't even tell it was him at first. What made it worse is that there was a lot of broken glass from where people toss their bottles."

I cringed at the thought of glass stuck in my face, and then shot a glance at Cricketsong, who seemed interested in the conversation.

"He's not here today, is he?" I asked as we made our way to class, weaving between classmates squealing and hugging each other, the hallway crammed with clumps of conversations and buzzing with the energy of the first day back.

"No way because it just happened yesterday afternoon. Cindy said he's going to be out of school for a while because he had to have surgery his face was so bad off."

"Too bad. He'll miss picture day."

"From what I've heard, he'll probably want to reuse his picture from last year until he

graduates, his face is that bad off.”

The bell rang and Judy and I claimed our desks next to each other in the front corner of the room by the teacher’s desk. We didn’t sit there because we were teacher’s pets and wanted to answer all of the questions on the board, but because Judy was one of the only African-American girls in our grade—hell, in our whole town—and knew that kids would say nasty things about her, but if she were up front where no one usually wanted to sit then she wouldn’t have to hear most of it. She acted like it didn’t bother her, that she didn’t feel like an outsider in our own class, but I knew it must’ve still stung, especially since we had all grown up together. Sometimes I wondered if we would’ve still been best friends if we weren’t almost-cousins, her daddy’s sister having married my mama’s brother. Then I felt bad because I knew deep down that I wasn’t that different from the other kids, that if it came down to being teased or staying quiet I would just hush up and mind my business. Judy had taken the time to be my friend, but if the situation were different, I wasn’t sure if I would’ve done the same for her. Cricketsong told me as much, and they were my true best friend.

“My ma says that I have to keep my glasses on for the photo this year since she didn’t pay this much for them not to be shown,” Judy sighed. “You’re lucky you’ve got good eyesight, Genie. They make my eyes look so small.”

“Cynthia would kill to have bad eyes,” I laughed. “Thinks she looks divine in a pair of cat eye glasses, but she can never fool the doctor into thinking her eyesight’s bad enough to have them. I think one day she really will need them, but no one will believe her.”

Judy grinned. “I’ll poke out the lenses of my old ones and give them to her. We’ll tell her she looks great when we know it looks ridiculous.”

I sighed and doodled on my paper. “Knowing her, though, it would somehow actually look good on her.”

“Okay, class! Eyes up here!” Mr. Sullivan rapped on the board. “I’m sure you’re all very excited to see each other after you’ve had all summer to get together and do whatever you kids do at your age, but we all need to pay attention to the instructions for pictures! I know, I know! So exhilarating!”

Judy rolled her eyes as we all rose to walk to the auditorium.

I knew it was just a school picture and that I had done it before, but as the line inched closer and I saw the flash of the camera I couldn’t help but get nervous. I tried real hard to make sure the photographer got a good angle of my face, but they ended up tilting my head all around until my smile was strained and all I could think about was that I wished I had spent more time brushing my hair that morning. When we got back to class, we were instructed to do silent reading while the teacher left to help corral the little students for their pictures. As soon as Mr. Sullivan left the room, all of the silence and most of the reading stopped.

“Hey, Genie. Hey, Judy,” Christopher Ridges greeted us as he and Henry Fowler sat next to us.

“Hey, Chris.”

Henry Fowler gawked at me. “Wow, you didn’t change a bit over the summer, Eggsy.”

It wasn’t outright an insult, but it wasn’t a compliment, either.

“And you’re just as observant as ever,” I muttered, but they had already turned away, back to another conversation.

I glanced over to see if Judy had noticed, but she was still reading, so I did the same all while listening to Henry and Christopher.

“Mary’s cute,” Christopher whispered. “And her bra size went up over the summer. I heard her telling Annie Jo about it earlier.”

I wrinkled my nose.

“My, what outstanding gentlemen,” Cricketsong said. “At least they won’t talk about you in that way.”

“Shut it,” I muttered underneath my breath.

Judy cut her eyes to me in confusion, and I broke into coughs to hide the fact I was talking to myself.

“Aw, come on, Henry,” Christopher hissed a little too loud. “You can’t tell me that there’s not a single girl in this room you would at least kiss. How about Genie? She’s alright.”

I tried really hard to keep my face straight and pretend that I was still reading. Henry considered me.

“Naw. She has too many freckles.”

Heat rushed to my ears, out of anger or embarrassment I couldn’t tell.

“Hey, I think she heard us,” he said, and they laughed.

I kept my eyes down and gripped my book so hard my nails creased little crescents into the pages. Too many freckles? *That’s* what he pointed out about my face? I hadn’t even thought to be aware of my freckles until he said that, hadn’t even really noticed

them. Now they burned like embers embedded onto my cheeks.

They kept laughing, and just as tears sprang to my eyes, there was a loud crack from Henry Fowler's desk, his front chair leg breaking. He yelped, toppled forward, and went face-first into the desk. The class howled, including Christopher. I looked up to see Cricketsong standing beside the desk, casually watching the scene. They shrugged, as if to say, "You're welcome." I grinned slow and mean back at them.

"I busted my nose!" Henry wailed. The laughter cut out as soon as it started. He untangled himself from the ground with Chris's help and leaned over the upturned desk. Blood dripped from between his fingers.

Judy shrieked loud enough at the sight of blood to bring Mr. Sullivan running into the room. He recoiled at the sight of Henry and the blood already staining his shirt. "Christ, what happened? Henry Fowler, I've told you time again to stop messing around with your desk! Settle down, everyone. Back to silent reading. Henry, with me to the nurse. Judy, go get the janitor and tell him we've got a mess to clean up."

Judy sprang from her seat and ran to find the janitor while the class dutifully sank into their desks, books pages rustling to cover the sounds of whispered conversation. It wasn't loud enough to cover the soft *pit, pit, pit* of Henry's blood dripping off of the desk and onto the tiled floor. My insides knotted as I watched the flash of red from behind my book. I smelled static, and then Cricketsong leaned over my shoulder.

"Keep reading," they murmured. "I want to know what happens next."

So I kept reading, Cricketsong patiently waiting for me to flip to the next page, and I felt better.

After school, Judy went to her piano lesson and I walked down main street to get to the garage owned by my Uncle Johnny, Judy's father. A train howled in the distance, long and mournful. I kept thinking about stupid Henry Fowler and his stupid face, the way he clutched his nose and cried while he was walked down the hall. I passed the antique store, catching my gangly reflection in the glass along with the dull shine of Cricketsong's eyes. I was almost glad that Cricketsong had broken Henry's desk. Served him right for being mean as a snake. A thought crossed my mind and stuck like a splinter: *Cricketsong had broken the desk*. Did that mean he wasn't imaginary? That he was real? He had never done something like that before.

"Cricketsong," I began slowly. "Did you break Henry's desk today?"

"Why would I do such a thing as that, little mouse?"

I studied Cricketsong's eyes, their grin. "Because if you're my imaginary friend, how did you do that?"

Laughter on the verge of mocking tinged their voice. "Who ever said I was imaginary? Am I not real to you, Genie?"

My mouth gaped open, closed again. I wasn't sure what to say, so I kept walking until I reached Johnny's garage. When I got there, he was changing out the headlight on a car.

"Well, look who it is!" Johnny grinned. "My favorite niece! You're just in time to see the magic. Your Pa ran out to get some parts."

I sat on the tool box while he popped in the headlight cover and then slipped inside the car. Johnny wiggled his fingers in the air, turned the key and, the headlight blinked to

life. I dutifully applauded, and Johnny bowed when he got out of the car.

“A true magician,” I complemented him. “An artist.”

“So, Genie-girl. I’ve got the ever-coveted new Beatles album, some Supremes, and my guy in the city recommended I check out Donovan.” Johnny pressed a hand to his heart. “I swear I haven’t listened to any of them without you. But, before we can listen to them, I could sure use your help changing the oil on this car.”

“Deal,” I said, shaking his hand firmly. “But I get to choose the music.”

I changed into the mechanic overalls Uncle Johnny had given me for Christmas a few years ago. They were big then, and still loose on me now, but I loved them. They even had a patch with my name on the front. We changed the oil, or rather he did most of the work and I handed him what he needed. I studied my faint reflection in the windshield, my freckles washed out in the light of the garage, and wished that it was how I looked.

After the oil was changed, Uncle Johnny put on Donovan and we sat on the cool concrete floor drinking cokes as the notes of Sunshine Superman twanged in the air.

“Hey, Uncle Johnny? I have a question.” I said.

“Go ahead, kid. Shoot.” He squinted one eye and did finger guns. “Let me know what’s going on in that head of yours.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?”

He scratched the back of his neck. “Ghosts? As in things like the Thicket Witch?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I haven’t seen anything myself, but there’s a lot of superstition around here. I know a lot of guys who will swear up and down that they’ve seen the Thicket Witch, but I’m not so sure I believe it. More than likely they just have too much

to drink and too little sense. Why are you asking?"

I shrugged and dragged my finger against the condensation on the Coke bottle, then finger painted a smiley face onto the grease-stained concrete. "Just wondering." I glanced at Cricketsong, who was sitting inside of the car and watching our conversation. A mosquito bobbed against the windshield and they reached up, caught it, and dangled it by a long leg as it writhed. Slowly, Cricketsong opened their mouth and ate it, chewing slowly. I shuddered and looked away. We listened to the album until Pa's truck rattled up to the garage. He grunted as he stepped out and unloaded the spare parts he'd collected from scrap cars to use for a fix.

"Hey, Randall! You ever seen the Thicket Witch?" Uncle Johnny asked.

Pa sighed and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Yeah, I've seen her. When I was a kid, some friends and I thought we'd go out to try and find her down by the abandoned Adams house with the weeping willow. Stupid idea. You don't want to go around messing with that sort of stuff, Genie."

"Yes, sir." My eyes flicked to Cricketsong. They looked back with that grin. "I'm going to head home now so y'all can work."

He nodded and then paused. "Genie, you aren't wearing those coveralls home, are you? You're getting a bit too old to keep wearing them around town, ain't you?"

My back stiffened. "No, I'm not." I wore them down the road and around the corner until a car drove by and I started feeling self-conscious. The rest of my walk home, they were stuffed in my bookbag.

That night, after I got ready for bed, I stood in the mirror and stared at my face. I chewed on my chapped bottom lip until I realized how homely it made me look, so I

stopped. I pressed a finger into my cheek real hard and then pulled it away, watching how my freckle whitened and then reappeared. A few times, I had pulled out the old makeup I had gotten for my ninth birthday, now crusty and dry, and tried to use it. But no matter what I did, it still made me look wrong.

I was at the age when all girls face the painful reality of if they're pretty or not. Now, no one's ever told me I'm ugly to my face, but they don't have to. I know I'm no beauty. All my clothing fits slightly wrong, my jaw sticks out too much, my legs just bowlegged enough. Boys in class didn't talk about me or look at me the same as the other girls, the ones who agonized over which of their suitors was going to ask them to the dance first. No one needed to tell me I was plain. I know enough to figure it out for myself. If I were like Cynthia and Mama and Gram, who were pretty without trying and real pretty when they did try (which they always did), things would be easier. If I felt the same way about a cute dress that I did about my coveralls. If I woke up and wanted to wear shiny patent leather Mary Janes instead of my canvas sneakers that were so beat up I had to replace my shoelaces with twine I found in Pa's workshop. My face was nothing extraordinary, but if I knew a thing from TV and books, the heroines of stories had to be beautiful. It was just how it was. You didn't get the starring role in *Bewitched* or *I Dream of Jeannie* if you weren't. Even Marilyn Munster was beautiful.

Tears stung my eyes. "I hate these stupid freckles," I muttered. "And I hate my stupid lips and my stupid eyes and my stupid face."

"Crying about it makes you look worse, little mouse," Cricketsong taunted in that rasp that was neither female nor male.

"Don't you ever leave me alone?" I snapped. "You're lonely. Is that it? Is that why

you're clinging to me all the time?"

"You only say that because you are," they hummed.

I sucked my teeth. "When have I ever said that?"

"You don't have to say it, child. It's in your eyes."

I scoffed. "My eyes? What would *you* know about eyes?"

The rubies flashed and I swallowed.

"It's not a matter of eyes, girl. It's a matter of seeing, and seeing is a matter of knowing."

They tilted their head. If I didn't know better, I would've said that they looked more solid, more—well, not human, exactly, but more there. More real.

"Well, you're wrong. I'm not lonely. I have me, and I have you, when you're not being mean. I've just gotta wait until I get old enough to leave and go to Nashville and find someone who, who—" Now that I was saying it out loud, I realized how childish it sounded, like when Cynthia was babbling on and on about something she wanted from a magazine. I had a dream of a future of glamour, my life as Emmeline, not Aubergine. I would be important, cool, chic. Elegant like Gram, memorable like Mama, sharp like Judith. An intellectual or a journalist. My awkwardness would peel from my bones, shed it like a snake sheds its skin. It's just that I had to leave to do that. Find people who never knew me as I was at thirteen. My cheeks burned.

"Find someone who sees the real you? Who sees past your exterior?" They laughed.

"How will you know they'll even like you enough to get to know you?"

"Shut up," I hissed, looking back at the mirror to swipe at my tears.

"Have you thought more about the gift I offered?" Cricketsong asked.

“Gift?” I frowned and looked at their reflection in the mirror. They twisted closer to me to stand right behind me.

“Have you forgotten, little mouse? The night I first met you, I told you I owed you a birthday gift.”

“Oh. Well, what kind of gift is it?”

“That’s up to you.”

Cricketsong gently took my face and tilted it up to theirs, up past their perpetual smile to those rubies, where my red-tinted reflection stared back.

“I hear your sorrows every night, child. I hear your wishes to look different. To look pretty.”

Some time ago, I started adding in my nightly prayers to God that he would let me wake up pretty. I knew it wasn’t a good wish and that I should learn how to be happy with myself, but I still couldn’t help from wanting it. If God had the power to do anything, like the pastor said, then he had the power to do this and in return I would be good for the rest of my life. I pleaded. I begged. I asked for even the teeniest, tiniest difference that would make me a little more content, like if my chipped tooth were fixed or my lips to not be so sullen. No matter how good I tried to be, my prayers weren’t answered. God didn’t answer.

Each morning when I woke up and ran to the mirror, Cricketsong would ask, “Did it work?” even when they knew full well it didn’t. They would say it with that sly smile, like they knew something I didn’t. Like *they* could do something if I just asked.

In the rubies, I watched in awe as my freckles faded away, my nose straightened and shrank, my hair became glossy and full. My eyes lightened until they were bright blue.

“Look,” they murmured, tilting my chin away from their ruby eyes and to the mirror.

I gasped. The girl I’d seen in the rubies gasped with me. “What? Who is . . . Is that me?”

“It’s who you could be.”

She looked exactly like how I wished I’d looked, but could never fully visualize in my head.

“What are you?” My voice was surprisingly steady. “Are you a ghost?”

.Cricket song tilted their head and drummed their nails against my vanity. “If I’m a ghost, whose ghost would I be?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“I can tell you this, little mouse. I’m no ghost. To be a ghost, you’d have to once be human.”

A chill ran down my spine but I ignored it, looking at my reflection.

“Is this my gift?”

“It can be if you ask for it.”

I bit my lip, and on her it didn’t look ugly. “But won’t people notice?”

“Not if I do it slowly. They’ll just think you bloomed into a natural beauty.”

They waved a hand and my face changed back to me. My stomach felt cold, and I rose and paced around my room. It couldn’t be real . . . Could it? Would there be any harm in trying?

“And how do I trust you not to mess me up?”

“Have I ever given you a reason to not trust me?”

“I have an idea.” I went to my desk and pulled out my old journal, only half-filled.

Opening it to a fresh page, I grabbed a page and began to write.

They loomed over my shoulder, and from the corner of my vision I saw their rubies flash.

Cricketsong all but purred. “Is that a contract?”

I finished writing and read it out loud. “I, Cricketsong, agree that for Genie’s gift I will transform her into the version of herself she saw in the mirror exactly. I will do it over the period of time of one year so that no one notices anything is unnatural.” Clearing my throat, I put my pen down on the page. “There. How does that sound?”

“Wonderful.” With their needle fingers, they scratched their name on the line in perfectly neat letters.

I took a deep breath and then signed the contract. I expected the weight in my stomach to leave, but it sat there like a rock.

Each morning when I woke up, I ran to my mirror and looked at my reflection. I was always disappointed to see my face staring back, but I knew I had to be patient. One day, when I was washing my hands, I glanced up in the mirror and froze when I saw that one of my freckles was completely gone, the one by the corner of my eye. In awe, I lightly touched the spot where it had been, then turned my head to notice that my jawline was just a bit sharper. It was working, slowly but surely.

On the last Saturday of September, Cynthia and I sat in front of the TV while Blue ran around outside shooting bugs with his Daisy BB gun. He hadn’t outgrown his

cowboy phase; if anything, he had grown into it. He read every old Zane Grey book he could get his hands on, watched all of the Western TV and radio shows, and was obsessed with scalping. He had decided he wanted to be either a sheriff or an outlaw—it depended on what type of mustache looked best on him. I was waiting for his obsession to shift to the war in Vietnam like it had with the other boys in his class, or even Batman for that matter. I was just tired of hearing him pretend to gallop around the house at all hours, and he terrorized Pa's hound Sorghum by trying to lasso him.

Earlier that morning, when it was raining and Blue was watching his cowboy shows and Mama made Cynthia get off the phone and I didn't much feel like reading, Cynthia and I pulled out the box of Barbies from underneath her bed and played with them again. It was comforting, in a sense. When we were little, I would make up the story and Cynthia would dress the dolls accordingly. My stories were always ridiculously dramatic tales of murder and betrayal, dolls dangling off of cliffs that were actually just the couch. This time, we tried to act out a story but stopped because we both silently felt aware of our age, of how ridiculous it was to *play* with dolls. There was a difference between girly and feminine, and it felt too girly—young, frivolous, simple. So instead of playing with the dolls, we just talked about nothing and everything as we changed out the dolls' outfits. Cricketsong sat on the floor next to me and watched, their fingers steeped underneath their chin. It was nice, to actually sit down and talk to Cynthia. Usually, the only time we talked to each other was when we were biting each other's heads off, so it felt nostalgic, almost, that we were passing each other tiny plastic shoes and muttering over fixing the dolls' hair. But then as soon as Blue's program went off, we abandoned the dolls to sit in front of the TV, watch *Bewitched*, and argue whether Darrin was right

for Samantha or not. (Cynthia said they were head over heels in love; I thought it was annoying that he wanted to stop her from using her magic. She was a witch, after all. Getting married didn't change that.)

Mama's perfume swept into the room before she did, powdery florals tinged by the sharp tang of hairspray and nail polish. She stood in the doorway and applied her lipstick without looking, a trick she had learned back in her pageant days.

"Come on, girls. We're going to visit your Gram. Up you get."

Cynthia whined. "But Mama! I Dream of Jeannie was coming on next!"

"We have our own Genie right here." Mama smushed a kiss onto my cheek, the scent of hairspray and perfume stinging my nose. "If you girls come with me to visit Gram today, tomorrow we can go to the department store and look for dresses for the fall dance."

"Genie's not going," Cynthia cut in. "Trolls aren't invited."

I watched as Cricketsong raised their fingers and plucked at the air.

"Ouch!" Cynthia sprang from her seat, rubbing her arm. "You pinched me!"

"No, I didn't," I said, fighting the smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. "I'm all the way over here. How could I pinch you?"

"Well, it had to be something!"

"Girls, enough!" Mama sighed, leaving the room to get Blue ready. "We're leaving in ten!"

After Mama made Blue climb out of a tree, where he had been perched on a branch aiming his BB gun into the leaves—"Bluesy, get *down* here right now!" "But there's a squirrel up here! I wanna make it into a hat!" "Blue Bell Geraldine, what did Pa say about

killing anything other than bugs?”—we all piled into the Thunderbird and made our way to Gram’s. I got the front seat because I was the eldest, and as we wove to the outskirts of town to Gram’s house, I felt their ruby eyes on me in the rearview mirror where they sat next to Blue, their long legs tucked into their chest. We went around the bend, weaving through the woods on a narrow road until we came to Gram’s, a Victorian home that belonged to her parents. I was no expert in old houses, but Gram hadn’t taken very good care of it, and from what I knew about my meticulous and proper great-grandparents they were likely rolling in their graves. The house used to be a deep burgundy but had since turned brown, the paint chipping off of the house and floating like leaves when the wind picked up. The wraparound front porch had cracked boards that Gram refused to fix because she said she knew where all of them were and would only step on one if she were in the mood to break a hip, and there were definitely bats in the attic—but you could probably say the same thing about Gram.

When Gram opened the door she was wearing a red silk dressing gown that was likely from her actress days in the 30s. A pearl mink fur coat was wrapped around her shoulders, and a gold brooch was pinned to the lapel, a reaching jaguar with diamond spots and tiny ruby eyes. Gram collected brooches, but only a certain kind: gold animals encrusted with diamonds and ruby eyes. She had dozens, at least, wearing a different one every day. I wasn’t even sure if I had even seen all of them yet.

“That’s a nice bauble, is it not?” Cricketsong commented. “Reminds you a bit of myself, does it not?”

Gram stood in the doorway, a slash of crimson lipstick slashed across her face and staining the cigarette perched expertly in her fingers. “Well, look what the cat dragged

in!” she greeted, turning around walking straight to the parlor.

“Hi, Mother,” Mama sighed, shooining us in and closing the door behind her.

We walked into the house, dust and cigarette smoke clinging to the air. Heat hit me like a wall, thick and solid.

“It is hot as Hades in here!” Mama exclaimed. “Mother, how are you not burning up in that coat? It’s over ninety outside!”

“I’m cold natured,” Gram snapped, sitting in her chair by the fireplace, which had a fire crackling in the hearth.

Cynthia caught my eye and twirled her finger beside her head: Gram was cuckoo.

As we all settled in, us kids on the couch across from Gram, she observed us with eyes sharp and distant, the fire glittering in her coal-dark eyes and sparkling on her brooch.

“So, Colleen. How are things?”

“The usual. Work at the salon’s the same. Kids are running me ragged. Blue saw a show where a character had a chicken coop and now he’s been begging for chickens of his own.”

Blue bounced in his seat. “I’ll feed them! I promise!”

“Maybe for the first week,” Mama sighed. “But then you know full well it will be me waking up at the crack of dawn to do the feeding.”

He pouted and crossed his arms, sinking as far back as he could into the couch.

As Mama rattled on about the salon and about how Pa was doing, Gram’s gaze shifted from Mama, to Blue, to Cynthia, and then to me. Across the room, I watched as Cricketsong stood by the portrait of Gram and my grandfather, who I’d never met but

who I gathered had left Gram when Mama was a kid. They tilted their head, watching a spider crawl up the wall. Cricketsong picked it up by a leg and I shook my head quickly, telling them to cut it out. They ignored me and ate it with a wet crunch. Gram's gaze trailed from me to the corner of the room where Cricketsong stood and back again. Her eyes narrowed, pinning me. Did she know? Could she know? My heart started hammering real fast.

"On the first day of school Henry Fowler broke his nose," I blurted. "Flipped his desk right after we took our pictures. Blood got everywhere, and the worst part is his mama is still making him come to school looking like that."

Gram took a long drink of her gin and tonic and snorted. "I'd hazard a guess that the broken nose is probably an improvement."

"Mother," Mama warned. "That's a horrible thing to say. He's a child."

"So what? Can't children be ugly?" She kept her piercing eyes on me before she turned to Cynthia. "But not our Cynthia. She's an absolute doll. Have the play auditions started yet?"

I bit the inside of my cheek as Cynthia talked about the play and how the drama teacher told her she would make the perfect Juliet and that she would be the first to audition when the time came. Gram talked about Chicago and the starring roles she had, the gorgeous men she had kissed on stage. Cynthia hung onto her every word. After gushing over Cynthia's acting and expressive eyes for what felt like an eternity, Gram jerked her chin up at me.

"And you, Genie. What have you been up to, beside watching ugly boys break their nose?"

My shoulders slumped up and down in a shrug. “Not much. Reading. Doing homework.” I knew better than to talk about the garage. Gram hated Uncle Johnny and his whole family because of the fact his sister June ran off with my Uncle Leo to get married in Chicago, where there weren’t any laws against blacks and whites wedding.

“Exhilarating. Anything else? Any new friends?”

Cricketson drew closer to her until he towered over her shoulder from behind the chair.

“No, ma’am,” I replied, keeping my voice steady. “There’s no one new in my class at school.”

“Well. In any case, you look different.”

I shrugged. “Maybe I’m just growing into myself.”

“No. That’s not it.” She dragged on the last of her cigarette and dropped it into the ash tray. “Genie, can you run upstairs to my bedroom and get my cigarette case? It’s the first room on the left.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I rose, thankful to not be sitting on that couch, and creaked upstairs. Cricketson followed. My teeth clenched. Mean, petty old woman. She knew your insecurities and she wasn’t afraid to throw them at you, not after she was the one to have made those insecurities in the first place.

Her bedroom ceiling was stained with cigarette smoke, and alcohol bottles covered just about every surface. I looked around, shifting the bottles until I found her cigarette case. Just as I turned to leave her room, a spark of gold caught my eye and I spotted them: her brooches. Despite the messiness of the rest of her room, her dressing table was immaculate with dozens of neatly lined up perfume bottles. In the center were her

brooches. Dozens of ruby eyes looked up at me. Gently, I brushed my fingertips over them, stroking the back of a beetle, curling around the wing of a hummingbird, tracing the delicate whorls of a poodle's fur. Then, I saw the rabbit.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Cricketsong murmured, the air sharp and cool as he curled around my shoulders. "Why does a mean old woman like that deserve such pretty things?"

"Because I bet she got rich by being mean." I held the brooch up to the collar of my jacket in the mirror, admired the way it glittered.

"She won't notice if it's gone," they said. "She already has so many. And she's been so mean to you, don't you think you deserve it?"

"I can't. Stealing is wrong." The brooch hovered over the shiny mahogany, clinked against the dresser—and then I tightened my grip, closed my fist around it, and put it in my jacket pocket. I wasn't sure if Cricketsong convinced me to take it or if I convinced myself. I think it was the latter. I walked downstairs with the cigarette case for Gram, the metal of the brooch warming in my palm. When I got back to the parlor, though, Gram and Mama weren't in the room. Their raised voices came from the kitchen.

"What happened?" I asked Cynthia, sitting beside her. Blue was already rolling around on the carpet out of boredom.

She rolled her eyes. "Mama is being too sensitive, as usual, and something Gram said set both of them off." Cynthia sighed and rose from the couch to stretch. "You sure did take your time finding those cigarettes."

"Her room is a mess. Empty bottles and glasses everywhere. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Eventually, Mama stomped out of the kitchen and grabbed her bag from the couch.

Gram trailed behind her, a glass of gin in her hand.

“Come on, kids. We better get home.”

Blue skipped to the door with a quick, “Bye, Gram!” Cynthia waved at Gram and followed them out. As I passed by her, she put a hand on my shoulder. It felt as light as a bird. I froze, unable to remember the last time she had touched me.

“Genie, you’re getting older, so you need to stay out of trouble and be careful of who you choose as your friends.” She tried to smile, but with her yellowed teeth it looked more like a grimace. “You’ll do what I ask because you’re a good girl, aren’t you, Genie?”

My anger bristled. I assumed by friends she meant Judy.

“No, ma’am. I don’t believe myself to be.”

Gram looked stunned for a moment, but then she barked a laugh and closed the door. I held the rabbit brooch real tight in my fist inside my pocket.

As soon as we got into the car, Mama lit a cigarette and took a long drag, her pink polished nails drumming against the steering wheel.

“Mama?” Cynthia asked hesitantly. “What were you and Gram fighting about?”

Smoke curled from her nose. “Oh, you know your Gram. Cold as ice and mean as a snake. There’s never really a reason for the arguing.”

We pulled away from the house, and I didn’t feel guilt as I ran my thumb against the rabbit’s ears. If anything, I was proud.

“How was the visit?” Pa asked that night at the dinner table.

“Oh, the usual.” Mama sighed, pushing her peas around on the plate.

Pa poked her arm. “What’s got you so quiet, little mouse?”

Mama stiffened. “Randall, you know I don’t like it when you call me that.”

He raised his hands, dark lines of grease staining his palms and creasing underneath his nails. “Okay, okay. Sorry. Didn’t mean anything by that.”

Cynthia and I swapped looks, but Blue was as oblivious as ever to the tension.

“Pa?” he asked. “You know I’ve been working real hard lately helping mow the lawn and deliver papers, and I have six dollars saved up. Can I *please* have a chicken coop?”

“Ew!” Cynthia exclaimed. “They’re going to get feathers and all their sh—” Mama cut her a look. “All their poop everywhere!”

“No, they’re not! I’ll clean it up!”

Sighing, Pa leaned back in his chair. “Well, I don’t know about that, Bluesy.” Rubbing his mouth, he looked to Mama, who tossed her hands up in exasperation. “Randall, if you’re the one to help him and not me, then it’s fine, I suppose.”

Blue all but jittered in excitement.

Pa smiled. “All right, Bluesy. I’ll make you a deal. If you promise to help build the coop and clean up, I’ll let you get the chickens and I’ll pay for the feed.”

“Yes!” jumping up and down, Blue abandoned his dinner and ran around the kitchen. Cynthia groaned.

“May I be excused?” I asked. I was waved away from the dinner table and I went to my room and closed the door behind me. I sat by my window and looked at the rabbit brooch, planning for when I was finally turned pretty. When I got to Nashville, I’d wear the brooch every day.

October came in a rush of color and chill. Blue got his chicken coop and spent all of his free hours playing with them and collecting eggs. Mama had even started teaching Blue how to make different things with the eggs, which lead to breakfasts where we'd all pretend to love the burned scrambled eggs he'd make only to toss most of it out and eat a second breakfast when he wasn't watching. Even Stray kept her distance from the chickens, more interested in stretching out on the porch and watching them. Then came the morning when I woke up to the sound of Blue's howling.

I thundered downstairs to the kitchen to see Mama rocking Blue in her lap, shushing him.

"Fox must've gotten into the chicken coop," Pa sighed. "No survivors. Blue's all tore down about it."

"If you'd let me shoot things with my BB besides bugs I'd have gotten it!" he wailed.

I ruffled his hair. "Aw, some on, Bluesy. I'm sure you can get more and then fight off the fox like a real cowboy.

He just cried harder.

"You know," Pa said. "The weird thing about it is that there wasn't anything left of them at all. Whatever it was ate all of them whole. Gobbled them right up."

"Enough chicken talk," Mama said. "Genie, go on and get ready for school. I'm letting Blue stay home today."

When I got back to my room and did my usual check in the mirror—my freckles were really fading now, and my lips had started to look more pouty—I saw it. Leaning down, I picked up the chicken feather laying on my vanity. I figured it must have come in off of my clothes. That is, until I saw it was speckled with blood.

“What did you do?” I hissed at them.

“Whatever do you mean?”

Shaking my head, I dropped the feather into the trash and went to school. Blue decided not to get any more chickens.

After the last day of school before our fall break, we all hung out by the railroad and lay coins and cans on the tracks to be flattened. Judy and I were waiting to flatten some pennies we had shined up when Annie Jo called over to us from where she sat with the rest of our class.

“Hey, Genie, Judy! Are ya’ll going out to look for the Thicket Witch tonight? It’s the full moon, and Henry says that’s when she comes out.”

“I’ve got piano practice!” Judy said, which I knew was a lie.

“Too bad,” Christopher said. “How about you, Genie?”

I shrugged. “I dunno. Probably not.”

“Oooh! Genie’s scared!” Henry cackled. “You don’t want to go because you’re afraid!”

Christopher shoved him. “Hey, cut it out, man. Maybe she just doesn’t believe in ghosts and haints.”

Behind me, I heard Cricketsong laugh.

“Oh, I believe in haints, all right,” I said. “I know a good bit about them. Trust me.”

“Yeah? What do *you* know about ghosts?” Henry shot back.

“More than you.”

“Then come with us.”

Everyone looked expectantly at me, but their attention was diverted when a train roared past in a blue of color and wind.

“Could be a bit of fun,” Cricketsong said. “You might as well go see Henry piss his pants.”

I laughed, and Judy looked at me like I’d gone crazy. As soon as the train passed and everyone ran to get their coins I turned to Henry. “Fowler, I’ll be there! But only because I might as well watch you piss your pants!”

Christopher howled, and Henry rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Eggsy. Meet tonight on Main Street, and we’ll see who does the pissing.”

As Judy and I walked up the hill with our coins, she huffed. “You’re not seriously going to go look for the witch with those idiots, are you?” She almost slipped on the fresh leaves and I caught her arm, helping her up the hill and onto the road.

“Come on, Judy. It won’t do any harm. I’ll just go and look and scare the shit out of Henry. It will be fun.”

“Those boys are mean, Genie. You know that.”

“They’re mean to me because I don’t look like the other girls,” I kicked a bottle out of my way. “If I looked like Cynthia or Annie Jo, then they’d be nice. You don’t get it.”

“I don’t get it? Forget that. *You* don’t get it. You’re so self absorbed sometimes I wonder about you.” Judy laughed, but it was biting and humorless. “You think you’ve got it bad? How do you think I feel, Genie? Barely anyone here looks like me. I’ve lived here my whole life and my daddy’s the best mechanic in town, but people will still spit at

me when I walk by them.”

Shame crept up my neck to my cheeks. “I didn’t know.”

“Did you know that people will go to the garage and refuse to let my dad work on their cars? They’ll only talk to your Pa and not to my dad, even though it’s his garage.”

She was crying now and I stopped, standing helplessly and feeling like an idiot.

“Even your own Gram has said nasty things about me because of Aunt June. I know you wished you knew Uncle Leo, but how would it feel for your side of the family to be the ones to be blamed?” Judy shook her head. “I’m going home, Genie. I’ll see you later.”

“Judy!” I called, but she kept walking ahead of me until she rounded the corner.

“How pitiful,” Cricketsong said, waiting for me to agree with them.

“No, she’s not,” I snapped. “You know she’s not, so hush up.”

As I walked, I wished I could leave Cricketsong around the corner like Judy had left me. But then ten minutes later they said something to make me laugh, and I knew deep down that I didn’t know if I could ever try to be apart from them.

That night, I sneaked out of the house and met Henry, Christopher, and Annie Jo on Main Street. As we made our way to the Adams house, Henry told ghost stories about the witch to make Annie Jo squeal.

“Back in 1817, the Adams family started hearing weird noises around their house in the middle of the night,” he started. “But they couldn’t figure out where it was coming from. They got everyone they knew to come over and look, but no one could figure it out. Then, their daughter started waking up with scratches all down her back and bruises.”

Annie Jo clutched his arm tighter.

“Then, the Thicket Witch started talking to them. She would say really mean things about the daughter’s fiancé and threaten to kill him.”

“But how’d they know she was a witch?” Christopher cut in from where he walked beside me.

“Because she would turn into different animals like a crow and a wolf and spook them by talking. She could even quote sermons from across the state word-for-word.”

“That’s kinda boring,” I said. “All she’s ever done was threaten people and do tricks, but it’s not like she’s ever directly killed someone.”

“That we know of.” Christopher wiggled his eyebrows.

“Nuh-uh! She poisoned Mr. Adams!”

We came to the abandoned road leading to the house and I climbed over the tree in the road that no one had bothered to clear.

“First, we don’t know for sure she poisoned him. And second, why would a ghost use poison? Couldn’t she have scratched him up real bad, done something bloody?”

“Genie, stop!” Annie Jo whined, but I only laughed.

Our conversation hushed when we got to the Adams house, a cabin that was still mostly intact despite the roof being caved in and the windows broken. We stood silent in the darkness, the only sound our breathing and the chatter of insects.

“Go on then, Genie.” Henry shoved my shoulder towards the house. “If you’re so unafraid of the ghost, you should go first.”

I shrugged, keeping my voice even. I reminded myself that I had Cricketsong. “All right, then. Move.”

“I’ll shine my flashlight inside for you,” Christopher offered.

Striding across the lawn, I crackled broken sticks as I walked up the stairs and to the front door. Slowly, I creaked open the door, took a few hesitant steps inside. The light from Christopher's flashlight lit the room from behind, casting my shadow long and lean across the back wall. The cabin was mostly empty, the furniture rotted away save for a few tables and shelves.

"Charming," Cricketsong said. "Lovely interior decoration, don't you think?"

"See?" I called outside. "It's not that bad!"

Then the light clicked off and the door slammed closed behind me.

"Hey. HEY!" I pounded on the door. "You assholes! Cut it out!"

I heard their laughter from behind the door as they held it shut.

"Quick! Get the rock!" Annie Jo called.

There was an ugly scraping against the door as they dragged something in front of it, blocking it and keeping me from opening the door.

"Calm down, Genie," Cricketsong murmured. "They want to get a rise out of you."

"Damn right they do!" I kicked the door. "And they're gonna get it when I'm out!"

"Leave it to me." They faded into the darkness, and that's when I got scared.

"Cricketsong?" No response. "Cricketsong!" I heard screams in the distance.

Rubbing my arms against the cold, I leaned against the door, my eyes flicking around the darkness so thick it hurt my eyes. If I could find the window, I could climb out.

Slowly, I stumbled around the room, my hand against the wall.

"But why leave so soon?"

The hair on my neck stood up. That wasn't Cricketsong. Slowly, I turned to look beside me and I saw her. The Thicket Witch wore all white, her dark hair twisted and

knotted over her shoulders. Her face looked calm, normal even, if it weren't for the gleam in her eyes.

Panting, I stumbled away from her and tripped onto the floor.

"Are you the one saying I should be meaner?" She came closer and her face changed, twisting and mangling itself until.

"Cricketsong!" I screamed. "Help!"

The Thicket Witch laughed and raised her hand, razor-sharp nails glinting. "Where should I scratch first?" She began to lunge for me when she froze, mouth twisting open in horror. "No. Not you," she shrieked. "Stay away!"

I blinked, and she was gone. I looked up to see Cricketsong standing above me. "Did you think I had left you, little mouse? Not to worry. You can't get rid of me that easily."

My breaths came so hard and fast my chest hurt. "Get me out of here."

"The door's open."

I shoved my way outside, the taste of fear metallic on my tongue. Henry, Annie Jo, and Christopher were nowhere to be seen.

"She didn't scare you too badly, did she?"

The way they asked sounded more mocking than concerned, but I still shook my head. The truth was, in that moment I was more scared of Cricketsong than the Thicket Witch. I wasn't sure if it was a good thing or bad. I didn't tell my parents what had happened. I went straight home and the next morning kept to myself reading in my room, afraid that Mama would notice something was wrong. After dinner, while Mama was in the kitchen cleaning up, I sorted through the mail with Pa.

"Genie, this one's from Chicago," Pa said, handing over an envelope. I excitedly

looked at Uncle Leo's neat, even handwriting. "Go take it to Mama so she can read it later."

"Letter from Uncle Leo!" I chirped, skipping into the kitchen. "Can we read it?"

"Not now. Leave it on the table and I'll get to it later." Mama sang to herself as she cleaned the uneaten food off of the plates.

"Do you miss Chicago? Why don't you ever want to go back and visit Uncle Leo?"

Mama paused her humming, the brisket slopping wet and heavy into the trash can.

"No, I don't. I was the one who wanted to move back here after your granddad left. I loved visiting my grandparents so much out here in the summer. Your uncle, though. I'm not sure he ever forgave me for leaving the city. He loved it there. That's why he moved back."

"You still haven't answered why you don't want to at least go back for a visit."

The knife scraped against the empty plate.

"Come on, Mama. I know he misses you, and I deserve to know my uncle, don't I?"

"Genie, stop," she snapped, a hardness in her voice I'd never heard before. "What is this, an interrogation? We moved here and that's it. If you're so curious, you can visit Chicago when you're older."

It felt like she had slapped me across the mouth. "Sorry," I whispered. "I'll just go to bed, then." The tears didn't start until I was going up the stairs.

I was in bed when there was a knock on my door and Mama peeked into the room.

"Genie? Can we talk?"

I kept my back turned to her. "I guess." Her shoes thumped against the floor, and then she sat on the edge of my bed.

“I’m sorry about snapping at you earlier,” she murmured. “It’s just hard for me to talk about Uncle Leo and Chicago.”

Slowly, I sat up to look at her. “Why?”

She picked at a run in her pantyhose. “Because when we were living in Chicago when I was a little girl, I used to have these nightmares. Real bad ones that would make me wake up screaming, kind of like how when you were little you used to have nightmares that the train would run off of the tracks and go through the house.”

I nodded, remembering.

She rose and took the porcelain mouse from my bookshelf. “I used to dream that I would turn into this mouse and that a monster would chase me around and try to eat me, calling out “Little mouse! Little mouse! I know where to find you!” She swallowed and delicately put the mouse back on the shelf. “It’s silly, really. I know that now.”

My heart thudded in my chest as I looked past Mama to where Cricketsong sat in the chair, watching. “No, it ain’t,” I whispered. I raised the blankets for her and she put the mouse down and crawled underneath the covers with me, something we hadn’t done in a long time.

“Mama?” I asked slowly, carefully, using my Blue voice for when he scraped his knee. “What did the monster look like?”

“Oh, it was so long ago,” Mama sighed, rubbing her face and smudging her lipstick. “I don’t think I ever really saw it. All I remember was that it had these big red eyes.”

I could feel Cricketsong’s rubies burning into me and I cuddled close to her, tugging the covers over our heads.

“Is that why you left the city?”

“Hmm? Oh, no.” She began to say something, hesitated, started again. “Well, it’s probably about time I told you. You’re old enough now. We left Chicago because my father was killed. He didn’t show up one night from work, and Gram went crazy with worry. Demanded that the police come then and there to look. Usually, someone being missing for a few hours wouldn’t get the police involved, but she was a big actress back then and convinced them to come. Well, there was an investigation, and people had seen him leaving work in a taxi and then stopping at the corner store for some milk. That was the last time anyone saw of him. We don’t know what happened for sure, but—” She choked up, paused and collected herself. “When the garbage men went into the back alley of the apartment building to collect the trash, they found him. Well, not him, but pieces of him: a finger with his wedding ring on it, a piece of bone, some of his hair. And the milk, sitting perfectly untouched.”

I smelled the static in the air and knew Cricketsong was looming over our blanket cave.

She gave me a slow, sad smile, eyes glassy with tears. “I’m not supposed to know all that, but Leo told me because he knew that I needed to know the truth or I’d have gone crazy. After that, we moved back here to be with my grandparents.”

“And then you met Pa and Uncle Leo met Aunt June.”

“Mmm-hmm. Funny how life works.” She stroked my hair from my cheek and paused. “Genie? You’ve got a streak of blue in your eyes that I’ve never noticed before. How about that.”

“So Gram stopped acting after you moved back to Bell Buckle?”

“She was devastated. Made us move so quick, we didn’t really have time for a real

funeral. That's what I came to talk about, Genie-girl. Your Gram isn't doing well, Genie. Trying to drink and smoke herself to death. She's always liked you in the ways she didn't like me. I know she can be mean as a snake, but she always tells me how smart you are and how witty. Says you're a bit of her."

"Mama, you know Gram loves you. She just has a difficult way of showing it, that's all."

"I grew up knowing that she and I were cut from different cloth. But your uncle's just like her, too. Same little smirk and devil streak in them. Same's in you. Gram just never saw in me what she saw in him, especially after he left." She laughed, shook her head. "I feel judged by that woman every time I'm under her gaze. I can feel it, her contempt, cold like opening the freezer. That's why I've tried so damn hard to let you know that I love you for who you are, Genie. I'm sorry if I wasn't doing it good enough for you. You're at a tough age, I know that. I just don't want you to ever feel like I love you less for not being like me or like Cynthia. There's people who love you for just who you are."

That's when my tears started up.

"I know Gram's tough, but I want you to go spend tomorrow night with her and visit. She was never the same after my father died, and then when Leo left, she got real lonely. That's why she wears those brooches all the time. My daddy started buying them for her as gifts, and then when he was gone Leo does the same even though they had a falling out about his marriage. It's all she's got left of either of them."

I started crying harder and she hugged me, not knowing that I was crying out of guilt and shame.

"Mama? Can you sleep here tonight?"

“Of course I can, Genie girl.”

I ended up not sleeping at all. Not with Cricketsong whispering to me all night:

“You know you’re my friend, Genie. You have no reason to be scared of me. I would never hurt you. I’ve given you so much already, haven’t I? You wouldn’t be who you are without me. I spend all day with you because I love talking to you, love watching you. No one understands you like I do, Genie. What’s love, if not that? I’m giving you what you prayed for, aren’t I? Talk to me, Genie. I know you’re not asleep. You’re my best friend; I know what you sound like when you’re asleep, what you dream of. Please, don’t be afraid of me. Not when I love you so much.”

I believed them, and yet I was too frightened to come out from underneath the blankets until morning.

After breakfast, Mama drove me up to Gram’s for my visit. The brooch was in my luggage, tucked securely in the bottom. It was a drizzly, cold day, and when we drove up to the house it looked like a chipped tooth dropped in the dirt. When I knocked on the door, Gram didn’t seem pleased to see me. Once again, she was wearing her fur coat, but this time with a lamb pin.

“Make yourself at home,” she sighed. “I don’t care what you do, really. I’m just doing this to please your mother. You’re too young to drink, so I’m not really sure what we’re supposed to do.”

We ended up sitting in front of the TV for most of the day in silence, Gram chain smoking cigarettes and making her way through as many drinks as possible. She taught me how to make a martini and let me take a sip, but I nearly spit it out and she laughed.

“You know, you’re not half-bad, kid,” she said. “You remind me a lot of myself when

I was younger.”

“Except I can’t act to save my life.”

“Oh, I don’t believe that.” The light from the TV glittered on her brooch as she took a sip of her drink. “Lying is a form of acting, isn’t it? From what I can tell, you’re a good liar.”

“She had a good teacher,” Cricketsong said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I replied.

“The evenness of your voice, the stillness of your hands. You know the tricks. Trust me, I’ve used them all.”

“I don’t want to be an actress. I’d rather be a journalist and move to Nashville. That or Chicago.”

A flame sputtered to life as she lit another cigarette. Based on my count, it was number six. “Chicago will eat you alive.” She craned her neck away from the television to face me. “Trust me. I know what it feels like.”

That night, when Gram went out on the porch to sit and watch the rain, I nervously walked outside and stood beside her. She had let her hair down, silver and so long it draped around her shoulders like a cape.

“Gram? I have something for you.”

Cricketsong hissed as I pulled the brooch out of my pocket. “That is yours, girl. You took it. It belongs to us now.”

I ignored them. Her frail hands took the brooch and held it up.

“So you’re the thief. I thought as much.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know what it meant to you until my Mama told me about what

happened to Grandpa Samuel. It's just that it was so pretty, and I was mad at you, and in that moment all I could think of was how much I wanted it. I don't know what came over me, but I wanted it so bad it hurt."

Gram held it out to me. "Then have it, Genie. If you really want it."

"Take it," Cricketsong insisted. "It's ours. Ours."

I hesitated. "Go on, girl. Take it."

The familiar weight of the brooch fell into my hand, and I sat down beside her.

"Thank you. That's generous of you."

She snorted. "Oh, I didn't give it back to be generous. Darling, I gave it back because I know that having back now won't feel like it did before. Forgiveness can make you feel worse than guilt. Now every time you look at that brooch, you won't be able to forget that shame. But you know what? You'll keep it anyways because you still want it. I know what it's like to want something so bad it devours you, and then even then you can't let go of it."

"You're mean," I spat. "You think you know everything about me, but you don't. You can't."

"I can because you're me, Genie. I see the same hunger in you that I had. Your Mama's always been tenderhearted, but you and I are different. We're selfish and self-serving."

Cricketsong's eyes flashed. "Old fool. She had everything and then gave it up. She's no actress. She's nothing. Nothing. Ask her."

"Then why the hell did you stop being an actress to come back to Bell Buckle of all places!" I screamed. "Your own son left because he knew that he didn't have a future

here, and Mama's just going to waste away her life here like you are! Cricketsong is right. You're nothing."

Her chair creaked to a stop. "What did you say?"

The intensity in her eyes frightened me, but I was too angry to care. "You're nothing."

"No. That name. Cricketsong." Her fingers clutched the handles of her chair. "Is it here right now?"

I gaped at Gram, not knowing what to say.

"Is it here, you stupid girl!" she screamed. "Answer me!"

"Yes," I stammered. "They're here."

Her eyes darted around in the darkness. "Where?"

"Right here beside me."

Cricketsong curled into my side as Gram pressed her fingers to her mouth, one of her perfectly manicured nails chipped.

"How do you know about Cricketsong?"

"Because it latched onto me when I was your age. It followed me to Chicago and then came back here with me. What did you give it, Genie? Tell me it didn't promise you anything."

Tears pricked my eyes. "I . . . I made a deal. I didn't give it anything. They said it was a gift."

She laughed then, shriller and harsher until she was cackling. "A gift? Demons don't give gifts, Genie. All they do is take. It has an insatiable appetite, and it feeds off of the desperate to get its fill, but it's never enough. It keeps eating, and there's no way to

reverse the deal. What did you choose as your gift? Beauty, right? Of course you did, looking as you do at your age. It promised it would make you beautiful, and you fell for it because it worked. Here's the worst thing about it: once you have it, you think you'll be content. But all it does is make you want more. ”

“Liar,” Cricketsong whispered. “Liar. I’m giving you beauty, aren’t I? Don’t you love me for giving you beauty? For being your friend?”

“And what if I love it?”

Gram’s chair creaked to a stop. Next thing I knew, she slapped me. I cried out and clutched my cheek.

“Stupid girl. Stupid, stupid girl. Don’t you understand? That *thing*, that *beast*, will end up eating you alive. It’s a jealous thing. Envious,” Gram whispered, rocking in her chair. “It won’t let you be happy. Won’t let you give your heart to anything. It takes what you love or anyone you give your attention to. It took my husband. I knew that wicked thing would come after my son, too. But after all I did for him, he ran off with that whore instead. Maybe it would’ve been better if that thing had gotten Leo had rather than throw his life away on that woman. When it turned its eyes on Colleen, I had to get rid of it. Bribe it.”

“Lies,” Cricketsong shrieked in my ear. “All lies.”

“What did they—it—do to Grandpa Samuel?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“Have you not been listening? It ate him.”

“No,” I stammered, stepping away from Cricketsong. It stepped closer. “It wouldn’t do that. Cricketsong’s just eaten some bugs and Blue’s chickens.”

“And how do you think you’ll stop it from eating Blue? Or Cynthia? Or your friend Judy? How about the boy who went missing the other night? The Fowler boy? Were you with him?”

I grabbed the railing to keep from falling. “Henry Fowler? No. He can’t be. We were—” Then I remembered the minute that Cricketsong was gone and the screams.

“What did you do?” I yelled at Cricketsong. “Where is he?”

“He was mean to you, Genie. You said you wanted to hurt him, so I did it for you.”

“No, I didn’t! I never wanted him hurt! What did you do?”

Cricketsong simply chomped its teeth in response.

“Gram, you have to help me,” I begged, tears dripping down my chin. “Please. How do I get rid of it?”

“You can’t undo the deal you made. It’s done. You have to give up what it gave you, and then some. A bribe that will satisfy its hunger enough to move on. Or a sacrifice.”

“What did you give?”

Dark eyes sparking like coals in the porch light, Gram rose. She opened her robe. I screamed before I understood what I was seeing. Underneath the robe, there was no Gram, no flesh. Just bone and organs, her shriveled lungs and heart. Her long hair blew into her ribs, stuck to the wet that was her insides.

“It gave me a body that made me famous. I had to give it all back.”

The porch was cool against my cheek as I sobbed. “No. No, I can’t. Not my face.”

“Yes, you can. You have to.”

Cricketsong shrieked, long and loud, trying to drown her words. “I won’t give it back Genie you’re mine I won’t give it back gifts can’t be given back they can’t I love you and

I will make you pretty!”

Gram put her face next to mine, but all I saw was her insides. “What’s more important, Genie? Your face, or your family? Your friends? It’s your choice.”

My hands shaking, I opened my fist, where the brooch was cutting into my palm. Slowly I opened the pin.

The crickets in the trees began to roar, louder and louder, until the windows rattled.

“For them,” I rasped over Cricketsong’s screams, over the crickets. “If I do it for them, will it end? Will it leave?”

“It won’t have any power over you anymore. You’ll be wasted. You have to before it—”

Then Cricketsong was ripping Gram apart and shoving her into its mouth, coat and all.

“No! Stop!” I screamed, but she was gone. Blood dripped from Cricketsong’s mouth, its rubies, as it turned to me. A long, silver hair clung to its teeth.

“All you are is your face, Genie,” it crooned. “You’ll only have a future if you’re beautiful. You’ll only have a future with me. Forget about the rest of them. They don’t love you anyways. They don’t understand you.”

“You’re a liar,” I whispered. I raised the pin, and it howled. With every stab, I repeated their names. *Blue. Cynthia. Mama and Pa. Johnny. Judy. Gram. Henry.* I kept stabbing until the crickets fell silent and all I could hear was the dripping.

The Last Will and Testament of a Stylish Woman

My friends and family filed into the room, a few snuffles punctuating the air of the sitting room as everyone settled into their seats. A hush fell over the group, the stillness that follows death. The executor of my will stood at the front of the room, dressed smartly in a navy dress, pumps, and a demure tan blazer.

“Thank you all for coming today,” she began. “Today we’re gathered in memory of a dearly beloved friend and family member to read her will and distribute her property. Now, she has left a very specific set of instructions pertaining to her estate and how her funeral shall be conducted. However, in the case of her possession, she only mentions her clothing. Everything else you will have to divide yourselves.”

All eyes in the room darted to each other in confusion.

“Right,” she said. “Let’s begin:

“I, being of competent and sound mind and not acting under duress, menace, fraud, or the undue influence of any person whomsoever, do hereby declare this to be my last will and testament.

You might think it doesn’t matter what I’m wearing as I write this, but it’s lush and dramatic so I’ll tell you. Imagine this: as I write this will, I’m wearing a black cable knit sweater that falls to my knees and a vintage, romantic black cotton robe adorned with gold piping and a classic floral print in subdued pink, purple, green, cream, and burgundy. I am wearing my gold wire eyeglasses, which tie in perfectly to the gold accents in the robe, and my white bunny slippers with their pink, fuzzy noses are keeping my feet cozy. If you’d like, you can stop the reading of the will to pull out these items,

lay them on a table and imagine me in the room with you. Or, if the executor happens to have a mannequin handy, that would do nicely.

Now, to get the matters of my funeral out of the way. When I'm buried, I don't care what I'm wearing as long as it isn't any of my clothing. If anything, a sheet wrapped around my body will do. If you try to bury me in my favorite dress or coat, I will reanimate my corpse in the middle of the eulogy, sit up, and take them off. What's the point of spending years developing my style and curating my closet to let these items rot away on a body that can't enjoy what it's wearing, a body that isn't even me anymore? When I'm gone, I'll have no use for aesthetics, and neither will the worms that will become my last and lasting accessories.

Instead of scattering flowers and wreaths around the room, display my clothing. Instead of plastering my senior photo on the funeral programs, include photos from my camera roll of my outfits. Each of my favorite garments is a piece of me. My closet is a better testament to my life, spirit, hopes and dreams and identity than any eulogy. At my granddad's funeral, I escaped the tense, sad smiles and whispered condolences of strangers to go to the back of the room, which held a collage of photos of him throughout the decades. It was like looking at a stranger, to see him grow younger and younger in snippets of his life that I had no idea existed, a time before me and before anything I could have imagined about him. But when I came to his uniform that he wore during WWII, touched the wool so thick it almost felt papery, felt the phantom weight of the coat on my own shoulders, I once again knew him. That uniform had carried him through Germany, France, fields and foxholes. He became a part of who I knew while he wore

that uniform as a second skin, and in that moment I understood more about him than I ever had. Maybe you'll have the same experience today.

As for my funeral's dress code, attendants are required to wear their favorite least-worn garment in their closet. Dig through your drawers, rifle through the hangers, and find that item—you know the one—that you wish you had more occasions to wear. Maybe it's a formal dress worn once for prom or a cocktail party, or the patent-leather dress shoes you've barely creased along with a fantastic tie. For the married couples, pull out your wedding dresses and tuxedos and try them on. I want you to feel everything I can not: self-conscious, ridiculous, overdressed, confident, itchy, free, alive.

If there is a secret to reveal after my death, it is this: there are skeletons in my closet. No, I don't mean that I'm a serial killer or kleptomaniac or have been hiding a deep, dark revelation that will rip apart your view of me, such as if I said that after all of these years I preferred Pepsi to Coke or that I spent years moonlighting as a serial killer. I mean that if you walk into my closet and see my clothing hanging in rows, folded and stacked, (and undoubtedly the items crumpled onto the floor), that you will be looking at ghosts. Each garment is haunted—by a previous wearer, and now by me. You can pick up these items and feel their past wearer's presence, the certainty sitting cold and solid in your stomach. These garments are more than functional, more than aesthetic: they were carefully chosen by the past wearer and now hold a bit of their personality, their soul. Step into my closet after I'm gone, and you'll understand.

These are the items I am requesting you must preserve or pass on and let them have a life beyond me. Sell them, gift them, donate them to a thrift store so that they can be reclaimed. Just don't pack them away and turn a box of old clothing into a coffin

where these items will rot away like I will, deteriorate thread by thread and sinew by sinew.”

The executor of the will paused the reading to clear her throat. “Now, we have gone through her belongings to locate the items mentioned below. They are all hanging here in the corner of the room for your reference.”

All eyes trailed to the clothing rack. In the low light of the room with the curtains drawn and from a certain angle, it almost looked like the distorted silhouette of a woman.

“Excuse me,” someone interrupted. “Is this not . . . *odd* for a will? Do they usually have this much narration?”

“Ma’am, it is not my duty to judge oddness, only to carry out the wishes of the dead. If this is how she wished to express her last wishes, then we will honor what she has to say.”

A jacket slid from a coat hanger and slumped onto the floor. Everyone jumped, some clutching their tissues tighter.

The executor clicked across the room and carefully re-hung the jacket, smoothing her fingers over the shoulders before she returned to the front of the room.

“As I read each item, I will hold it up for view. Now, if there’s no further comments, let’s continue the reading of the will:

“Lee Riders denim jacket, circa 1970s

This jacket was handed down to me from my mom, who wore it sometime during middle school. It had a nearly-fossilized peppermint and chapstick in its pocket and carried a musky attic scent. The faded denim is softened and frayed with age,

camouflaging stains both old and new. Let your eyes trace the yellow thread detailing down the pointed collar, along the shoulders and pockets, down the zigzag stitch running along the button holes. It would fit short and narrow on someone else, but on me the sleeves just graze my wrists. I expect this jacket will outlive my mom, outlive me, and possibly outlive you as well.

Fuschia wool chenille top and skirt set by Lofties, 1950

This skirt set was bought by my MeeMee, my mom's mom, in 1950, a year before she had her eldest child. This garment is an odd juxtaposition: the wool makes it feel heavy, solid, and yet it is delicate with age, the waistband wearing away against the elastic. Inside the skirt, there's a tiny, fabric tag stapled to the hem that I assume is a dry cleaning tag. Scrawled on it in jagged cursive is a name that I believe to be Lloyd Driver, my grandfather. My MeeMee wore the set in the 50s, likely with a smart pillbox hat, pumps, and a clutch, and my mom wore it in the 80s before I spotted it in her closet and claimed it for myself. By another miracle, it fits me, who is smaller than my mother who is smaller than my grandmother. The wool, now slightly sour with age, must have shrunk over the years, almost as if it were anticipating me.

When I spent a semester in New York City, I knew this set had to come with me. I wore it to my first day of my internship at Penguin Random House, like I was taking her support with me. I imagined my MeeMee wearing it when she was my age, imagine who she was before her identity was wrapped in the titles of mother and grandmother. When she bought this set in 1950, she was 22, the same age I am now, and yet was in a completely different stage of life than I am. She was married and a year from having her

first child; the thought of marriage and lifetime commitment at my age strikes fear into my heart. Still, when the skirt hugs my hips and brushes against my ankles, when I carefully secure the covered buttons and slip on the matching belt, I know she felt these, too.

Blue floral maxi dress with Empire silhouette, long sleeves, and mockneck collar, circa 1970s

I found this likely handmade beauty at a vintage market in London. I had already found a pair of fantastic overalls and was wandering around the stalls when a flash of blue caught my attention across the market, drew me in. Once I saw the bright blue poking out in the rack, it was never my decision to look at the garment—I moved on my own accord, wove through shoppers and avoided jewelry stands to cross the plaza until I was at the stall. Pulse quickened, I drew closer, trying not to get my hopes up. Paper tags hung from each sleeve, listing the measurements of each item as there was no fitting room. I squinted at the tag, and a still disbelief settled when I read my exact measurements. I tugged the dress from the rack, held it up in front of myself in the slim mirror propped against the wall, and I was instantly mesmerized. I talked to the vendor, was surprised by her American accent. She was from New York, where I was going to spend the next semester. Coincidence stacked on coincidence, and I didn't feel guilty as I paid for the dress, more than I had anticipated spending at the market that day.

Later, when I went back to my flat, I tried on the dress, mesmerized that it fit me exactly. The hem wasn't too long, the sleeves not too short, the waist and bust hitting me perfectly. I imagined the woman who wore this before me, a vision of her heavy eyeliner

and sleek, straight hair shimmering in the mirror. Did she also struggle to find clothing that would fit her petite frame? Did she make the dress herself, or did her mother make it for her? Did she casually wear this around the city like I did, too in love with the dress to worry about being overdressed? Sometimes I worry that the dress is upset I displaced it from its home in London, dragged it to Nashville and New York (and paired it with white Western boots, of all things). Still, I love the juxtaposition of the vivid blue florals against the muted city landscape, the way the skirt swished against my legs as I stood on the subway platform. I imagine the *shh, shh* of the polyester is the dress whispering secrets to me as I move.

Green Madison Pep Club Varsity jacket featuring chenille M stitched with the name Kim, circa 1970s

I know three things about Kim: one, that she lived in a nice, suburban home in Brentwood, Tennessee, and owned a student desk—handed down to me from my mom, who got it from my MeeMee, who somehow purchased it from a school. I know this because I went to Kim’s estate sale. Two, that she likely worked for an airline and her husband a railroad (or the reverse) because at the estate sale was a basket of pins for railroad service and flying achievements. Three, that in high school she was a member of the Pep Club at her high school in Madison, Ohio (go Rams!). I know this because at the estate sale I bought her letterman jacket.

When I was working at the mall, mindlessly folding and refolding clothing, my coworker and thrifting buddy asked if I had ever been to an estate sale.

“No, I haven’t,” I answered through my mask, pausing our conversation to greet customers, tell them about our sales, and then remind them to wear their mask in the store because of the mandatory mask mandate issued by the city because of the global pandemic. Since you couldn’t see my smile, I made my voice sickeningly chipper and sweet. As soon as I turned back to my coworker, my voice dropped back to its normal register.

“There’s one two weeks from now, and the listing said they had women’s clothing and some vintage. You in?”

Vintage clothing? I was in.

We arrived at the house early the morning of the sale, slipping our masks on as we stepped out of the car. Before the sale began, the line of shoppers scattered down the sidewalk was given the rules: masks must stay on at all times, stay six feet apart from other shoppers, there will be no touching of each other. This is how I, a masked stranger, entered the home of another stranger and dug through her belongings. I scanned the array of Coach purses, skimmed the dinnerware and overpriced jewelry, made my way upstairs to the bedroom. And there it was, hanging on the end of a clothing rack: the perfect vintage letterman jacket. Dark green wool with white detailing and white leather shoulders, a large chenille M on the front embroidered with the name Kim. The back is dominated by a ram patch and the cursive, “Madison Pep Club.”

Have I ever had an abundance of school spirit? No. Was my name Kim? Also no. But wearing the jacket is like shrugging on another identity, the confidence and belonging that Kim felt when she wore the jacket, that seeped into the stained silk lining and became a part of the jacket.

Cream, green, pink, and orange paisley tapestry blazer, circa 1960s

When thrift shopping, I have a simple set of rules. One, always check for stains and holes before you buy an item. Clothing likes to hide its flaws in dim lighting, distract you with its bright pattern or shiny buttons until you fall for its tricks and take it home to reveal its true character. I think people are the same way, so I can't blame them. Then follows the regret and the sometimes futile attempts to stitch up a hole or remove a stain. The thing about stains is that it might look insignificant, but it could be decades old. Once a stain sets in, it spreads and sinks in deep like meanness. You can use white vinegar, baking soda, ivory soap, lemon juice, hydrogen peroxide, bleach, but the stain will always disfigure the cloth even if it's a little better hidden.

The second rule is that you should leave no section unexplored. Vivid men's clothing is usually placed in women's, dark women's clothing in men's, petite women's clothing in children's. Clothing in thrift stores isn't strictly organized by size, brand, or even fit. If anything, the organizational structure is gender stereotypes. Is it plus-sized and not aggressively feminine? Must be men's, how could a woman that size exist? Pink, or vaguely floral men's shirt? No, has to be women's, because what man would be comfortable with such a display of femininity? Categorizing clothing is an act of negation, of limiting and gendering. Don't do the same when you're shopping.

The third rule is that you have to let the clothing speak to you. If you go in looking for specific pieces, the racks will scoff at you, your arrogance. You have to be open to finding something you never imagined you needed until you catch sight of it. That's what happened when I found my favorite blazer, a thick, woven pattern of neon

green and pink paisley against a white background. Unconsciously, I grabbed it off of the rack, gave it a once-over, examined the tag and confirmed my impression that it was vintage, and threw it in my cart before continuing my search. If I had paused and paid more attention, I might have seen the fluorescent lights flicker, revealing the shadow figure filling the blazer for a moment before fading. The shadow figure had called out to me, grasped my arm, convinced me of its worth, and I followed its orders without thought. Most will call this instinct or luck, but I know there's something more sinister and supernatural at work.

When I picked up the blazer, I had fully intended to sell it on my small online vintage store. But when I tried it on that night in the yellowed light of my apartment, my reflection speckled with dust in my cheap mirror, I paused, almost disbelieving at how well it hugged my shoulders, the way the pink and green brought out my blonde hair. In that moment, I possessed the blazer but it possessed me back, and I knew I couldn't part with it. It had chosen me, and I would honor it.

Gold Monet charm bracelet, circa 1960s

It's odd how suddenly an obsession can start. I was rereading *The Lovely Bones* and started thinking about charm bracelets, a key piece of evidence in Susie Salmon's murder. Then came the cursory Google searches and the sneaking intensity of the conviction that I needed a charm bracelet. There's plenty for sale online, make-your-own options and the pages upon pages of vintage bracelets with charm that felt random to me but were intentional by whoever had collected them. Charm bracelets are an expression of personality. I could've worn a random bracelet with tiny tennis rackets when I don't

play tennis, charms engraved with Happy Anniversary when I am single, delicate baby bassinets when I have no children. Eventually, after hours of research, I found it: a vintage gold-tone Monet charm bracelet with five charms: horse, treasure chest, praying hands, genie lamp, and a king poodle.

The horse and praying hands evoke my childhood in Tennessee, the idyllic rustic and Southern roots I claim even though I've lived in a suburb my whole life, the Sunday mornings attending church and warbling my way through the hymns. The treasure chest opens, but nothing is inside; I like it this way because expectations are a tricky thing. The genie lamp also opens, and this one isn't empty—a miniscule genie sits inside. How typical, to wish for something and be met with a man acting as a gatekeeper for these desires. I like knowing that he's locked inside the lamp. The poodle charm is the centerpiece: a tiny crown rests on its curls, an enameled and slightly chipped red tongue matching its ruby eyes. When you pull a tassel dangling from the poodle's collar, his tongue and eyes move.

The bracelet is too large for my skeletal wrist, so I tied on some string and wear it as a necklace. Its soft jingling and weight is comforting, hypnotizing. The charms are visible symbols that others can try to interpret but only I understand in relation to myself. I imagine that if I met the woman who collected these charms that she and I would be friends, if we're not already. I hope she approves of me wearing it. Or, I should say approved. Now, the approval is mine to give."

The executor paused the reading as the bracelet was passed around the room. "Along with this narration, she has left a list documenting every other item in her closet and which garments she styled together. I won't read all of it here, because it's quite

long, but I'll leave it as a reference for when her estate is divided. Now, all that was left in her will was this closing remark:

“When you wear these items, know that I am with you. My spirit is in each garment, so please treat them with care. I will be waiting patiently in your closet until I can move with your body and see with your eyes and speak with your tongue. When you pass, too, and leave behind a piece of yourself in the garment, we will haunt the next wearer together as one. Until we meet again, may your outfits be inspired and style evergreen.”

The funeral was carried out as planned. I watched as the mourners, dressed as if they weren't attending a funeral, stroked their fingers over each piece of me, my garments, and eavesdropped on their conversations:

“Where in God's name would she have worn that?”

“Oh! I remember her wearing this one. Yes, with red lipstick. The event? Oh, there was no event. It was just a Saturday.”

“She left this one to me. I'm not sure what I'm going to do with it. Maybe I'll wait until my kids are big enough to wear it and use it for playing dress up.”

“Where did she find all of this? Are you sure she wasn't a hoarder?”

They said these things in hushed tones, knowing that I was gone but unconsciously feeling that I were listening, watching, that I was in the room. Which I was, of course. And when the eulogy was read, tears were shed, the casket was lowered into the ground and everyone dispersed back to their lives that were wholly unchanged except for a new addition or two to their wardrobe, I went with them.

Afterword

In many ways, Gothic literature is about contradiction. The past interrupts the present, ghosts haunt the living, the uncanny and the grotesque are in direct contact with the sublime. Fashion is the same way. Past trends haunt the present, the lines between masculinity and femininity are blurred, individual style comes into conflict with the reigning style of the zeitgeist. My goal in combining the Gothic tradition with fashion is to examine how personal style is an awareness of identity, the effects of time, and the tensions of gender that are connected to clothing. I also aimed to incorporate literary aspects into the common tropes of Gothic literature such as haunting, the supernatural, and heightened emotions by writing from a character and voice driven standpoint rather than the drama of plot elements. My use of creative nonfiction and fiction allowed me to verbalize my personal connections to fashion, examine my own style history, and then expand these personal aspects into the universal through my characters. I hope that my personal writing gives insight into individualistic practices of style that feel applicable to any reader and that conversely my fiction allows the reader to use the context of the story to narrow in on the tenets of their style and identity.

The theme in my writing that compelled me the most is the idea of haunting, not just in the sense of the supernatural, but in how our past identities and expressions of these identities through fashion have an indelible effect on our views of our bodies and in how we physically inhabit the world through clothing. Haunting doesn't have to be creepy: it can be fascinating, especially when it comes to looking at the past iterations of our selves, like in "Cupcake Shoes." Our clothing carries aspects of our past selves because in style is an intentional matching of aspects that represent who we are, what we

feel, and what we plan to do. Identity is complex, and I aimed to express this complexity through the different iterations of my personal style over time, whether through specific moments in my life or through the examination of specific vintage pieces that carry with them the historical weight of their past wearers. Clothing doesn't just age; it wears, and these signs of use reveal snippets of the history of the past wearer. In conjunction with the style of an item, these aspects can be used to construct the ghost of the previous wearer. I applied this method to "Last Testament" in particular as a way of examining how the past influences the present.

These questions of identity especially come into play in Gothic literature in that the disruptions of the present by the past or the common by the supernatural forces the individual to question everything that they once knew. The past isn't separate from our experience in the present, and like a generational curse past events and concerns are passed on and renewed in the present, where an individual must reconcile these disparate aspects. Through this reconciliation comes insight and understanding. If the past and present cannot be reconciled, then terror is created, like in "Cricket song," when family secrets compound through the generations. "Cricket song" is my piece with the most Southern Gothic influence, even if *Genie* is more influenced by the physicality of appearance rather than the physicality of place.

My usage of the uncanny in "Fashion Phoebe" and "A Self-Reflection" in particular rely on the tensions between the human and the artificial. Sentience is attributed to objects that are humanesque and yet one step away from being a true double of reality. Through these pieces, I aimed to explore how distancing from your own individual experience can be odd, alienating, and yet revealing in that habits, mindsets,

and the core principles of individual identity can be discovered. This dissociated perspective is removed from time, and yet it observes time and uses it to make sense of the present. The doll of Phoebe watches her girl and learns how to gain her humanity through mimicry, like how in the process of “A Self-Reflection” I was able to identify insecurities that were previously hidden by critiquing my own reactions to my appearance.

Overall, my hopes for this thesis are that I was able to express the interconnectedness of identity, style, and time in a way that is compelling and utilizes the Gothic genre to illuminate my thoughts about what it means to get dressed. Style isn’t always fun and expressive—our ways of dressing reveals our insecurities more clearly than a mirror. Clothing is more than a functional decision; it is the most immediate way that we signify what is important to us to those around us. Our style is not immediate; it is a perennial process of growth, reassessment, and critique of who we used to be. After reading this collection, I want you unconsciously pause when getting dressed and consider what each piece says about you, to use the seemingly superficial aspect of clothing to dive into the tensions and conflicts in the act of dressing.

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